

Book 2: The Chamber of secrets

"I'm wondering what would be the best magic spell to put it on fire..."

Harry Potter, Harry Potter et la Chambre des Secrets, page 15

Prologue: The Masons

Author's notes: Well, here it is. The first part of the second book of my serie of the snake-who-lived... sorry, I'm tired and my brain's a bit... off. (Dodges tomatoes at the horrible pun) Ack! Sorry!

For all of you newcomers, please read the first part first. It's for a good reason this is book 2. It's because it's the second book. (D'uh). So, don't go asking questions like "What the hell, when did *that* happen?!" and "Who's Elmira?" passing by "Draco's OOC!!"...

...actually, say the last one if it's true, as I said before, I want EVERYONE's opinion... if, of course, they took the time to read the previous book. -_-

Did I make myself clear? This is book 2.

Now, people who have read J.L Matthew-sensei-kami-sama's Slytherin Rising, you'll find something very similar here. Although I *did* inspire myself off the various Slytherin Harry fics out there (And SR), what will happen is the logical result. I'll keep it quiet until it happens. Newcomers who haven't read SR yet, get ready for one HECK of a surprise.

With that said, let's go right along!!

At first glance, Harry Potter looked like a mostly typical child, if a bit thin and small, and looking a bit silly with his messy black hair and enormous glasses. However, everyone who knew him for real knew he wasn't, whether they liked it or not. And the Dursley family, who had the task of watching over him during the summer, fit in the second category.

Even though they hated it, however, they had no choice but to tough it and hope the summer passed quickly. Why? Well...

"Change the channel, Dudley."

"Why should I?!"

"Azrabi—" *Click* "There, wasn't too tough, was it? Didn't even have to curse you for it."

...having started his first year at Hogwarts as a Slytherin, Harry had learned how to milk whatever he had to get the maximum he could. And so he was doing, 'milking' the Dursleys fear of magic and the fact that they didn't know he wasn't authorized to do magic. Of course, they weren't able to detect the small sparks coming from his wand. Amazing how even the enormous pachyderm that was Uncle Vernon trembled in fear at the sight of few harmless sparks...

...of course, the sight of a 250 pounds pile of fat and skin tremble was a bit nauseating as well.

And so, here he was, sitting in the comfiest chair of the living room, the chair usually reserved to his fat uncle, with Nemesis wrapped around his neck and his wand proudly laid on his lap, listening to TV

to the channel *he* wanted and with Dudley, who couldn't survive without his near permanent connection to the screen, serving his every whims like some terrorized dog.

...life was good.

Tomorrow was his birthday, and the Dursleys were giving him the prefect present by ignoring it. He hoped, however, that his friends hadn't forgotten.

Blaise Zabini was in Italy, visiting her family. Since only a week had passed, Harry doubted any letters she sent him would be here yet. As for Draco Malfoy, he had given the other boy a strict order not to write him, which he was most likely following himself.

He wasn't expecting much from those two. One or two letters from Blaise during the whole summer and probably nothing from Draco. However, he wondered what on earth were Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley doing; he hadn't received a single message from his Gryffindor friends.

...worse than that, Hedwig had come back from Hermione's empty-taloned. The girl hadn't replied, for reasons he ignored.

He hadn't received a single letter, actually. It was almost as if the previous year had been a dream, and that he hadn't studied magic, played Quidditch or kicked Quirrell's two-faced butt in a wit fight.

'course, Nemesis was there to remind him it was all too real.

That day, at the supper table where Harry was, to the Dursleys, regretfully admitted, uncle Vernon took everyone's attention.

"I trust you all know what day tomorrow is." He declared.

Harry looked up. His birthday?! They couldn't possibly...

He absentmindedly checked in the sky had suddenly turned pink with purple polka dots and if there was a flight of migrating pigs heading south.

"If everything goes well, tomorrow, I'll have signed the biggest and most successful deal of my career."

Nope, not pink sky, no polka dots and the only pig he saw was sitting on the other end of the table. He should have remembered, Vernon had talked about it for weeks, a deal that would assure Grunnings' survival for the next three years at least.

"Mr and Mrs Mason are coming here tomorrow night to sign the contract. Absolutely *everything* has to be **perfect**. I think we'd better review the program again. We'll all have to be at our posts at eight O'clock sharp. Petunia, you'll be?"

"In the living room, ready to welcome them with all the dignity they deserve."

'*Oh, you'll laugh and mock them then?*' Harry thought, barely holding back the smirk that threatened to slip on his face.

"Good, very well." Vernon agreed. "And you, Dudley?"

"I'll wait by the door to open it as soon as they'll ring."

Harry mentally snorted. '*Yeah, then they'll REALLY know it's a setup. He should wait a few seconds before opening.*'

He then added, in a false, almost falsetto voice, "May I rid you of your coats, Mr and Mrs Mason?"

"Oh, they'll simply *adore* him!!" Petunia squealed.

'*Compared to what, a bee sting?*' Harry sneered mentally.

"Excellent, Dudley." Vernon agreed, before turning to Harry.

"And you...?"

"I'll come down the stairs, with my best manners and help make the lot of you look respectable." Harry mentally hummed the theme to 'Mission impossible'.

Vernon grumbled something undecipherable and glared at Harry, who let the tip of his wand pop out of his sleeve and produce a bunch

of green sparks. The man suddenly found the wall behind Harry very interesting, before turning toward the snake coiled around Harry's neck.

"And that snake?"

"Nemesis will be calmly laying in my bed, not making a sound." Harry assured, petting the snake.

"Geesss, sssoundzzz fffamiliar."

"Just this once." Harry hissed, unheard as Vernon queried Petunia on her 'mission', to be done at 8:15.

"It better be." The snake grumbled.

"I'll announce that supper is served." She said.

"And you, Dudley, you'll say..."

'We're eating pork today, I'll be right there in the oven.' Harry mentally filled in for the fat boy.

"May I accompany you to the dining room, mrs Mason?" He declared, holding one of his porkish arms out to an imaginary lady.

'Might as well get the cue cards.' Harry flatly thought.

"My perfect little gentleman!!" Petunia declared with enough sweetness to her voice to rot a dozen dentist's offices right to the basement.

Skipping over Harry, quite fearfully, Vernon turned to Petunia.

"We should prepare few compliments to give them during the supper. Any suggestions?"

"Vernon told me you were an *exceptional* golf player, mister Mason... Where did you find such a wonderfully elegant dress, mrs Mason?"

'Imagine she comes here in pants and shirt.' Harry mentally smirked.
'You can't pre-plan compliments, it's a basic planning rule.'

"Perfect. Dudley?"

"I could say 'We had a redaction to do at school about our favorite hero... I picked you, Mr Mason.'"

It was too much for Petunia, who promptly squealed and, tears in her eyes, hugged her child, as much as she could since her long, thin arms couldn't get around the fat boy. Vernon was nodding solemnly while Harry's smirk was having trouble not to reveal itself. Nemesis, however, had no such restriction and was letting out loud guffaws of hilarity.

"And you?"

"Oh, I'll be sitting right here, eating my part and seeing what I can say." Harry said with a shrug.

"You'd better watch your mouth, boy." Vernon snapped.

"It's not like I have anything to gain by ruining this deal, Vernon." Harry retorted, making sure his wand was showing and shining softly. "In fact, the better off you guys are, the better off my summers are."

"The Masons know you're our nephew, but they don't know you *live* here. They think you're just saying here for a short time."

"Fine with me." Harry said with a shrug. "I'll just have to think of a reason why I'm staying with you lot."

And with that, he walked out of the dining room and up the stairs.

"We had a redakshhion to do at shhhkool about our fffavorite hiiiro." Nemesis repeated in a false falsetto. " 'I picked you'. Honessstly, who'll fffall fffor zzzat one?!"

Between his laughter, Harry closed the door and petted Nemesis. "If they do, I'll start worrying for the IQ of the muggle world." He replied.

The following day was a mess of running around. Everyone was busy getting everything ready; A pyramid of fine crystal glasses was installed in the kitchen, allowing Petunia to show how well off they were. Pictures were moved from the entry hall to the dining room and the living room, although they clashed horribly with the walls. In fact,

Harry mused, anything that bore the face of a Dursley would clash horribly with anything except a junkyard.

Everyone was busy, except Harry, that is. He was still installed in the couch in front of the TV, comfortably laying and listening, on purpose, to Dudley's favorite cartoon, which he couldn't watch because he was getting his clown costume... erm... I mean... Smell things... Smelting uniform – sorry – installed correctly on his imposing form.

Everyone had picked their best clothes, if they can be called such. Only by complete and total annihilation of all sense of taste and sight of the world could the Dursleys manage a fashion statement... even then, their chances were nearly dead.

For Vernon, the choice had flatlined at his horrible two-sizes too small maroon ensemble who's buttons threatened to pop off. To the super-extended jacket and pants that almost went up all the way to his knees he added a red bow tie and a pair of canary yellow socks.

As for Petunia, it had kicked the bucket on a candy pink dress who's original purpose was probably to accentuate the curves of a female human body. However, given the fact that she had as many curves as a two-by-four, the effect was totally wasted and went quite the other way. Add to it a heavy, cream pearl necklace and pair of white high-heels she was tilting on top of and the result was nothing short of the apocalypse.

And as much as Harry would wish otherwise, his best clothes were nothing but rags.

'We'll be lucky if they don't run away at the first sight' Harry mentally sighed. Number four, Privet Drive had never looked like such a clown house before.

By eight, everyone was ready. To Harry, stationed up the stairs, watching the Dursleys get ready was like seeing actors getting ready for their cues in a bad soap opera. A bad soap opera for blind people, since anyone with good sight would take immediate fear at the horrible clash between Petunia's dress and the floor, the walls, the roof... the whole world, in fact.

Already, a flaw appeared in their plan; at 8:20, the doorbell finally rang. A *well dressed* couple walked in, the man dressed in a grey business suit while the woman was impeccably clad... also in a business suit, with shirt and skirt. Neither wore a coat, as it was quite warm outside. Yet, Dudley still said his cue. Harry almost burst out laughing.

'Incoming problems in the plan!!' Harry thought in general hilarity, his chest shaking and hurting from holding back the laughs.

"Erm... no, thank you." Mrs Mason said to Dudley, who blushed embarrassedly.

'Forget it, Hufflepuff would be too smart for them.' Harry mentally snorted.

"Welcome, Mr and Mrs Mason." Petunia said in a sing-song voice that sounded so natural Harry unconsciously looked for the cue cards. "I am Petunia Dursley, Vernon's wife."

After short handshakes, the Dursleys tried to lead the Masons in the living room. However, Mrs Mason spotted the sole person here who was neither.

"And who are you?"

"Oh, I'm Harry Potter, their nephew." He said smoothly, much to the astonishment of Vernon, who looked surprised that Harry had managed to sound natural. For good show, Harry added a perfectly natural-sounding "It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Uncle Vernon said a lot of good about the two of you."

"So polite!" Mrs Mason said with a smile. "His parents did a great job raising him... you must be so proud to have him in your family!"

"Y..Yes, well... hmm..." Vernon stuttered, his face alternating between an embarrassed white and an infuriated purple.

"M...May I guide you to the living room?" Petunia managed with a fake smile on her face and a warning look at Harry.

As the two visitors followed the inspiration for clothing incinerators, Vernon turned an irate glare toward Harry and grabbed him violently by the shoulders.

"Don't you *dare* try to make us look bad, you ungrateful brat!" He hissed dangerously.

Keeping his cool, Harry smirked. "Don't worry, I won't try." He said. '*I won't have to*' He added mentally. '*You do a plenty good job by yourself already.*'

As Harry sat down, Petunia started unfolding a soap opera of juicy stories that made them look like the most normal folks of the neighborhood. If the desired effect was to make the Dursleys look better, it failed. All it gave was the – righteous – impression that Petunia had nothing to do in her days that peep at the neighbors.

Once the stories had ran out, and Harry was very satisfied to see a relieved expression on Mrs Mason's face, they went to the dining room. Petunia served the food, which was richer and more delicate than ever; then again, finding richer than roast beef and steak is quite a simple task.

To Harry's great surprise and pleasure, he found out that he could eat all he wanted and no one could be the wiser. The Mason's presence had the pleasant side-effect of forcing the Dursleys to be nice... without the threat of being cursed, of course.

"And you, Harry?" Mrs Mason asked, smiling sweetly as the smaller boy devoured through a generous helping of chicken. "Where do you go to school?"

"A boarding school somewhere in the north. My guardians send me there so I don't spend much time with them." Harry said, trying to sound both sad and angry.

Vernon's skin had turned chalk white. He was about to say something when Mrs Mason continued to ask.

"Your guardians?"

"Nasty folks, the less they do with me, the better for them and for me. I'm so glad I'm in a loving house right now." He replied, although there was a very healthy dose of well-hidden sarcasm there, who's target well found.

"What happened to your parents?" Mr Mason asked.

"They died in a horrible car crash, some loony drunk decided to drive on the right side of the street." Harry replied, before shrugging. "I don't remember much, though. I was just a baby."

"Sorry to have brought that up." The suit-clad man apologized.

Harry smiled sadly and nodded, before turning back to his chicken and pigging out. Vernon looked positively stunned that he had managed to tell the truth... well, almost, while hiding his "Abnormality", his unfair treatment and keeping a perfectly straight face... Even Vernon was convinced, at that moment, that the boy was perfectly normal.

The conversation shifted a couple of times, going from golf games, jokes (Most of the times out of context, as they had been pre-planned as well), until uncle Vernon managed to turn the subject on Mr Mason's building company... and his need for drills.

Seeing uncle Vernon's manipulation skills and subtlety in action was as inspiring as seeing a bulldozer carve a two-inch wide ceramic block in an attempt to make a ring. A rough, unpracticed, brutal and generally a dangerous affair. Anytime, now, Harry expected him to say "...and we'd get so much richer than we are now if you sign that contract... SIGN IT NOW!!!"

Not that he did.

...surprisingly.

It was nearly six when Mr Mason took out the contract from inside of his business suit. Taking out a long, black pen, he signed it with practiced ease.

"Here you go, Mr Dursley." Mr Mason said with a grin, passing the paper to Vernon. "We've got ourselves a deal."

With a grin twice as wide as his face, Vernon signed it, while Mr Mason continued to speak.

"After all, people who protect a child such as this one from abusive guardians can *only* be great." He said, pointing at Harry. "Though I have no idea what those horrible people can find on him."

Vernon's grin visibly faltered. A bit rougher than necessary, he handed the contract back and grumbled something undecipherable.

"My thoughts exactly," Mrs Mason added. "he's a true example of a gentleman. If only all boys were like him..." She said, almost in a sigh.

"Thank you, Mrs Mason." Harry said with a cheeky grin that seemed one hundred percent grateful and was, in truth, one hundred percent victorious, as he looked at Vernon's irate face.

So, it wasn't a surprise when, as soon as the Masons were out, Vernon turned toward him and bellowed "IN YOUR ROOM!!"

To which Harry simply shrugged, walked up the stairs, but not before smartassing a "They might have heard you, you know that, uncle Vernon?"

And a Harry in hysterics burst into his room, laughing at the face his uncle had made. He started to wonder if the Dursleys had chameleon blood in their veins when he finally managed to take control of his laughter – requiring a lasso and several kilometers of metal cables – enough to open his eyes and turn them toward his bed.

And boy did his laughter stop.

Harry Potter is safe in his cage, sir!"

Dobby, Harry Potter et la Chambre des Secrets, page 21

The readers suddenly find themselves sitting in a rather large, green-toned show bar, on identical metal chairs, in front of identical... plastic tables written Fisher-price on them. The bar owner and barman was apologizing loudly to a group of angry girls, explaining that he had blown off his pathetic author-induced budget simply with the chairs. The lights slowly dimmed, causing the noise to fall identically. Soon, only the green-draped stage was lit up, and the carefully concealed speakers – hidden as curtain-covered speakers – begin blowing out voices, evidently from behind the curtains.

"But... sir, Dobby no know—"

"Shut up! Now go up in front, read the text and receive whatever they throw at you in the face." A self-willingly demonic, echoing voice said. Of course, the electronic amplifier lit up on the stage, with cables heading behind the curtains, had absolutely nothing to do with it.

"...you is crueler than my masters, Akuma-sama sir."

"Thank you. Now go."

A kick later, little Dobby stumbled into the stage, bearing a piece of paper that had evidently seen better days, days where it wasn't massacred with chicken scrawl that a certain author that shall remain nameless was forcing him to read.

Giving a nervous look at his audience, Dobby cleared his throat and began to read. "Akuma-sama sir would like to apolagw... em... apologize?" The elf gave a look at the curtains, where a fist, bearing a cheap, ten bucks, electronic watch brought him back to attention. "Er... apologize it is, to his wonderful readers, and would like to spank

them for the wait... erm... THANK them!!" The elf squeaked quickly. One or two readers gave a disappointed groan.

"School, being the... ditch it is, has bit off a rather brge.... Barge piece of his tune... Akuma-sama sir, that makes no sense..."

"Just keep reading, Dobby." Exasperation on a demonic voice is *not* something you forget easily. Even if it's *not* electronically changed. Certainly not.

"...ok..." The elf squeaked, before looking down and continuing the lecture. "Oh... it Time. Make more sense... almost. Akuma-sama sir would like to add that the fusion of this chqpter... is that how it said?" A threat later, Dobby continued, a bit faster. "also made the wait longer, forndng him to write two chapters before updating."

By now, the speakers publicly report that Dobby is a intellectually challenged animal of canine descent, at least on the mother's side, with a disability to read languages written in 'Author's personal notes' font. Of course, the fact that said font is *only* readable by their writers didn't strike him. Even if he *is* writing this presently.

Ignoring the insult, Dobby continued. "Akuma-sama sir would like to finish by saymg that all reweivs are wekome, all flames will be mercybssly deskoyed and any physical punishment can be inflicted to Dobby by the time he reads this... er... Akuma-sama sir? I think Dobby made mistake... er... where did Akuma-sama go? Why is public staring at Dobby like this? ...why overweight lady taking out baseball bat? ACKKK!"

As Dobby is being crushed in the background, one of the readers sigh and grin. "Well, I said it before. Dobby torture is fun. ...Ok Draco, metal baseball bat or spiked club? ...Definitely right. One metal spiked club, barman!"

"Certainly." The barman said happily. Perhaps with all the weapon sales he did today, he'll be able to buy decent tables.

...As the storm cleared, Akuma-sama, dressed in a black cloak hiding his face, steps up on the stage. "Without further ado and only another

merciless kick on Dobby, here's the chapter!" He declared, giving said present to the rather maimed elf.

Chapter 1: The Dobby Dilemma

A Harry in hysterics burst into his room, laughing at the face his uncle had made. He started to wonder if the Dursleys had chameleon blood in their veins when he finally managed to take control of his laughter – requiring a lasso and several kilometers of metal cables – enough to open his eyes and turn them toward his bed.

And boy did his laughter stop.

Sitting on his bed was the strangest creature he had ever seen. And that, considering the number of critters he had seen in the previous year, was something. Small, barely reaching to his hips from where it was, it had a pair of large, bat-like ears along with two enormous, globular green eyes the size of tennis balls. It was also dressed in disgusting rags, which must have once bore roughly the looks of a pillowcase.

"What in the world..." Harry wondered out loud.

The creature slid from the bed, where Nemesis was unnaturally coiled, apparently knocked out as he was about to strike, and bowed so low its nose almost touched the floor.

"Harry Potter, sir, I is honored to finally meet you!" It said in a very high pitched voice.

"Lower your tone!" Harry hissed. "You'll get the Dursleys here!"

The creature nodded and blocked its mouth with long, skinny hands.

"First, what are you, and what are you doing here?" Harry demanded.

"I is Dobby, Harry Potter sir. Dobby the house elf." It said much more quietly.

"House elf, eh?" Harry said, remembering the submissive subspecies of elves usually serving rich wizard families like the Malfoy's.
"Who are your masters?"

"..." The house elf seemed to wonder whether or not to tell him. Seeing as his answer wasn't coming anytime soon, Harry decided to let it drop. The last thing he wanted was for the elf to punish itself.

"Can you tell me why you're here for, then?" He repeated.

"Dobby is here to warn you, Harry Potter sir... Harry Potter must NOT return to Hogwarts!"

"What?!" Harry hissed, before catching himself. "Any reason why?"

"There is a plot to make terrible things happen at Hogwarts... Harry Potter must *not* return!"

Harry snorted. "I'm not likely to stay here, Dobby." He said before sitting down on the bed. "What did you do to Nemesis?"

"It about to attack Dobby, Dobby just defend himself!" The house elf said, before waving a long, bony finger toward the unconscious snake.

"Uh, what'sss going on?" The snake hissed as it groggily opened his eyes.

"A house elf." Harry simply replied, before turning to Dobby. "And I'm *not* staying here."

"Harry Potter *has* to!" The house elf squeaked, jumping up and down in an attempt to look forceful. "Harry Potter must stay here, where it's safe!"

"Are you doing this to every Hogwarts student?" Harry asked.

"No, just Harry Potter."

Harry stopped to think. Why would a house elf, who is a creature pledged to follow a family's order until they're either freed or dead, come especially to him? Could Draco have sent him?

"Do the Malfoys know you're here?"

"No..." Dobby squeaked nervously.

"Ah, so you *are* their elf." Harry guessed immediately.

The elf's eyes went wider, almost growing as big as a children bowling ball. With a squeak, he bounced on Harry's desk, startling a resting Hedwig into letting out a squawk, grabbed the lamp and would have smashed it on his head had Harry not grabbed the lamp an inch in front of the elf's head.

"If you need to punish yourself, do it outside. The Dursleys would kill me if they knew you were here." Harry said. "And then that... plot would be the least of my worries."

The house elf nodded slowly, then sat down on the desk, twisting his ears all the way down .

"So, about staying here, my answer's still no chance in hell. Besides, if I don't come back, my friends would come and get me out of here."

"Friends?" Dobby asked, smiling slyly. "Friends who don't write to Harry Potter?"

The Slytherin part of Harry's mind clicked, looking at the creature's grin. "Wait a second, how do *you* know I haven't got any letters?!"

The elf's grin visibly faltered. In fact, his entire posture now screamed of anxiety. Nervously, one of his hands went inside the rags that made his clothing.

"Ah, so you have them on you, then." Harry guessed with a frown and a cross of his arms, before locking the window. He moved directly in the elf's path to the door.

"Don't even *think* of getting out with those." He threatened.

"D...Dobby thought he was doing good... make Harry Potter think his friends have forgotten him so he wouldn't want to go back to Hogwarts..."

"Do I have to say it in a dozen languages, Dobby? *I will go back to Hogwarts.*" 'Hope he doesn't take that suggestion seriously, I only know English.' He thought.

"But Harry Potter be in danger..."

"And that's a new situation, why? Now give those letters."

"Not unless Harry Potter promises not to go to Hogwarts!" Dobby exclaimed loudly.

"Fine, I promise." He lied.

"A truthful promise!" Dobby snapped.

'How in the world did he know I was lying?!' Harry wondered. Certainly the elf wasn't able to read the author's words, right? Erm... *Blush* Whoops, slipped.

"That's like asking me to be truthful at saying 'I love Dudley to bits!', it's as possible as the moon suddenly deciding to tan its back side with some earth rays!" Harry exclaimed.

"Then Harry Potter leave Dobby no choice."

The elf promptly ran directly at Harry and leaped up high above his head, rebounding on the wall before breaking into a run downstairs.

"Oh no, no, no!!!" Harry hissed in horror, following him as fast as he could. Fortunately, the Masons were gone, and the Dursleys were listening to the television, talking loudly and celebrating on their deal; they didn't hear the two enter the kitchen.

The scene that welcomed him in the aforementioned room was quite horrifying, at least to Harry. The elf was levitating the pyramid of priceless crystal glasses, that aunt Petunia had taken a good hour to carefully install, rather close to the roof.

"Dobby, no... put those glasses back on the counter..."

“Harry Potter must promise not to return to Hogwarts!”

“Ok, I wont!” He lied again.

“Harry Potter is lying again... Dobby is sorry, Harry Potter sir, but Dobby must do this...”

And he let go.

CCRRRAASSHHH

The pyramid shattered into a billion of pieces directly at Harry's feet with a deafening crash. Horrified, Harry was frozen on the spot. The voices in the living room immediately stopped and, instead, quickly approaching footsteps came to his ears.

“Dobby is sorry again, Harry Potter sir, but Harry Potter is safe here...” The house elf said, before vanishing in a pop of smoke, just before an irate Vernon Dursley burst through the door...

...imagine the scene he saw. Harry Potter, who had just been scolded, alone, in the kitchen while he should have been in his room, standing in front of an enormous pile of broken glass that turned out to be the extremely expensive crystal glass collection of Petunia's.

It was easy to explain why he flipped.

Harry quickly whipped out his wand and sprouted green sparks out of it.

“Stay back, or I'll turn you all into toads!!” He threatened.

The Dursleys visibly faltered. There was one weapon they didn't have, and it was magic. And the prospect of being turned into anything but the abnormally *normal* people they were wasn't enchanting, pardon the pun.

And as Harry was about to try a hasty retreat, an owl burst through the window, throwing a letter directly at Vernon's face.

...a letter bearing the ministry of magic's crest.

Vernon ripped the letter open and read it, his tint going from a furious purple to an ecstatic, yet enraged, red. With a sinister grin, the man passed the letter over to Harry, who read it and felt his hopes drop down all the way to the basement of hell.

Dear Mister Potter

We have been informed that a levitation spell has been used in your residence tonight at 9:50.

As you are aware, first class wizards are not authorized to throw spells outside of school and any recurrence could lead to your expulsion from said school (Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery, article 1875, paragraph C).

We must also remind you that any practice of magic liable to be seen by members of the non-magical community (Muggles) is an offence punished by the article 13 of the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy.

Please enjoy the rest of your holidays. ('Not likely.' Harry thought darkly.)

Mafalda Hopkirk,

Improper use of magic office

Ministry of magic

Seeing the demented, diabolical glint in Vernon's eyes, Harry gulped. His summer suddenly looked much less enjoyable.

'Damn that ministry.' Harry cursed mentally.

"You didn't tell us you couldn't do magic during the summer..." Vernon began, almost deliriously.

Harry tried to steady his voice as he said "It must have slipped out of my mind..."

"I am so sure." Vernon growled.

~~*~~

Harry Potter's summer went from 'Supportable' to 'GET ME OUT OF HERE!!!' in the span of the next five hours. First thing in the morning, Vernon had installed thick bars to his window, had locked Hedwig inside her cage with a large padlock, had locked Harry's own door with a large chain-lock and another that needed a key, which Vernon did a show of *always* carrying with him like some kind of lucky amulet, protecting it like a seal holding a demon captive.

Harry was effectively locked in his room, unable to go out except to go to the bathroom once a day, and for only talking companion the sarcastic and slightly annoying Nemesis. Add to it the fact that, with three occupants in the room, the meals aunt Petunia slid him through a small slit in the door were not nearly enough, it made Harry want to try sliding through the bars to escape.

"We could alwaysss cook the owl."

"Get that idea out of your head, Nemesis."

The only good point of Dobby's visit, however, was that he received the letters he had been missing. Hermione, Blaise and even Ron had written to him, their letters he had found laying innocently on his bed after the elf's disastrous departure.

Heya Harry!

*How 'zit going? With the Dursleys around, I can guess not too good, right? Well, I'll bet you don't want to talk about your summer – not that I could listen from all the way out here – so here's how **mine** is going so far:*

Boring.

Yup. Nothing's going on!! I'M FREAKIN' BORED!!! All we're doing is visiting aunts, uncles and grandparents that the last time I visited I had as much vocabulary as Crabbe on a slow day.

*The only good point is that the temperature is perfect. Only problem with **that** is that Italian wizards don't like to be outside. Result? More than half the time, we're stuck indoors, listening to old grandmas rant about 'Kids these days', Inflation or other problems that I don't give a damn, all the while being smoked alive by pipe-smoking uncles...*

Write me back, I need something to amuse me, at least until it's time to go back to Hogwarts!!

Grumblingly yours,

Blaise.

Harry snorted. Blaise, the hyperactive, dark-cherry haired Slytherin who was usually his neighbor, couldn't stand to have nothing happening around her. Getting a bit of comfort out of the fact that one of his friends' summer was as miserable as his – maybe not as bad, but enough to lift his spirits -, he continued to look at the letters.

The next one was from Hermione, the bushy-haired Gryffindor know-it-all.

Harry,

Next time you send your owl here, try to ask it to wait in my room. You cannot imagine the scene it did when it tried to fly in through the window and mom closed it in its face. It was a bit funny, and fortunately it didn't look hurt

...I still don't know its name though.

No matter. I was surprised when it didn't carry a letter, though... is it some kind of message for me to write? Very thoughtful of you, I haven't got an owl myself, and Errol, that's Ron's family owl, is a bit old... I would have felt bad to borrow it.

*How are things on your side? I hope the Dursleys aren't too horrible. Things are pretty much normal over here. I've had enough time to re-read last year's books and do my homework (Which I **hope** you've at least **started**). – Harry could almost feel the girl's stare from the paper. Did you receive anything from Blaise or Malfoy Draco?*

*I have **got** to stop spending so much time around Ron, his bad habits are rubbing off on me. If this keeps up, I'll start forgetting my lessons.*

'And Hell's first snow day will be declared.' Harry mentally snorted.

Reply soon,

Hermione

Harry sighed and put it down. Reply soon, she had written.

'As if I can.' He grumbled mentally, glaring at the offending bars on his window and wishing them gone straight to under Dudley's mattress, imagining them being squashed flat under the extreme weight of his cousin, suffering and screeching in agony as their life escaped them...

...of course, since those were mundane, lifeless and regular metal bars, they weren't likely to yell and suffer, even under the 'Dudley pressure torture'.

Picking up the next one, from Ron, Harry began the difficult job of deciphering the boy's chicken scrawl.

Harry

Message from Hermione, she's asking why you didn't reply her letter. Is everything going all right on your side?

Harry guessed it had taken a word from the girl to force Ron to write to him. No matter, he had expected the same. While their relationship had gone a long way from hatred, it was still far from being total friendship. The red-head still bore some distrust for him.

...then again, he did the same for all Slytherins.

She's really worried about you, it's been a full week since she wrote to you. She's about ready to use the Felepbone... well, that's what she wrote. I have no idea what she's talking about.

You'd better reply, or else,

Ron Weasley

'I think I'll have to risk the 'or else'.' Harry thought, once again wishing horrible suffering to the bars on his window.

A full week passed and the Dursleys didn't change. Dudley made it a daily ritual to walk up to his room early in the morning, to open the trap door and bully Harry while eating an ice cream cone, a piece of cake or whatever other unfortunate sweets that ended up under his considerably large hand.

Harry was quickly tired of this. Hungry and angry, the boy made sure to stay close to the door, on the Monday of the second week of July, listening to the footsteps in the hallway. Dudley's were heavy, slow and generally came with him opening the slit and bellowing "BOO!!" with all his lungpower. Petunia's were quick and very hard to notice, as she was so light.

However, it was the third set, also slow and heavy, but not quite as much, that interested Harry.

"Uncle Vernon!" He called through the slit as soon as his uncle passed by.

"What, Boy?!" The man grumbled, glaring down at the opening.

"You do realize that if I don't get to Hogwarts, they'll come here and get me, right? And they won't be very happy if they see how I've been treated..."

Vernon's voice didn't come right away. But when it did, it was with a grumble of:

“Thanks for sharing.”

...and no food came the next day.

...nor the day after.

The Dursleys had sunk to a new low.

The next four days were hell for Harry. His stomach was protesting, grumbling loudly at the injustice of it all while smashing away at his belly with jagged hammers. On the fifth day, he was laying down in his bed, with barely enough strength to lift an arm, surprised at still being alive.

He would have tried to escape using magic, already, if he didn't feel like the smallest levitation charm could finish him off.

The only one to still have energy was Nemesis since, as he kept repeating, to the boy's general annoyance, snakes eat a lot less than humans. However, even he was getting hungry.

That day was spent like the other ones. Moving as little as he could to save energy, Harry kept trying to sleep, and trying to ignore the pounding in his stomach – which certainly was not an easy feat.

However, that night, he was awakened early, pulled out of a dream in which he was gleefully teasing a starving Dudley – the imagination required to create that image is far from being within human reach – while eating the various sweets with an exaggerated ecstatic expression on his face. Behind him, Vernon was locked inside a bird cage hanging over an open fire and Petunia was being munched on by Fluffy, like some kind of chew toy .

One of the three heads looked up at him and barked, in a barely understandable growl:

“Potter? You in there?”

And Harry Potter's eyes whipped open in surprise as his dream was flushed down the drain.

"Whuu...?" He managed, his arm reaching to his bedstead to get his thick, black-rimmed glasses, which were currently laying on his nose.

"He *is* in there!" The same voice said excitedly.

Harry managed to identify it after racking his memories for a good minute.

"Ron?" He asked.

"Naa, it's Merlin's beard." The other boy said sarcastically. "C'mon, we're getting you out of here."

"How... bars..." Harry mumbled.

"Not a problem, I got Gryffindor's official two-person wrecking crew right here with me."

Harry managed to get up and look out the window, where Ron was sitting on the back seat of a car parked in front of it. On the front seats, the infamous Weasley twins Fred and George were giving him odd looks.

"Sheesh, they really did a number on him, didn't they?" The one on the driver's seat noted.

"Yeah, if we left him here, we might have had the chance to win the Quidditch cup this year."

"Not... a chance." Harry managed with a weak grin, putting more of his weight on his desk. His legs were protesting against the weight of the body upon them, his arms were begging for a chance to lay back down in the mattress and his vision was evidently playing tricks with him.

...how else would you explain a flying car?

Oh yeah, magic.

...then how about undulating walls?

Harder, eh?

Harry felt his energies leaving him extremely quickly. The bars on the window, which the youngest Weasley boy was tying ropes to while talking gibberish that the exhausted mind of the black-haired youth couldn't begin to comprehend, seemed to spiral on themselves a second before the entire world turned black around him and he fainted out of exhaustion.

I'm really glad to see you, Harry. Come in the kitchen, you must be hungry.”

Molly Weasley, Harry Potter et la Chambre des Secrets, page
41

*Author's notes: This chapter is just as big as the Weasley family!!
HUGE!!! 17 pages!! Enjoy it!*

Chapter 2: Welcome to the Burrow. Population, many, many, many.

“...right down... back...”

“...kins ran right in yelling... “HARRY!!”... romantic...”

“...up, ..red!!”

Everything was fuzzy for Harry Potter when he woke up. The world around him was a very dark place, not in the evil sense but in the pitch-black, “Erm... where’s my nose?” sense. His body felt like it had went ten times in the throughout wash cycle in a slightly too violent industrial shredder... erm... washing machine. His arms felt like rocks, his legs had apparently ran a marathon without him, his stomach was being assaulted by a dozen jackhammers minimum, while his head felt like the big Ben tower stuck in a time loop at midnight.

...he didn't quite feel all right.

Slowly, Harry's mind woke up. After the initial 'Who am I? Where am I?' questions were halfway answered, he decided to try to guess where he was. First, what had happened.

...He had been starved, got rescued by the Weasleys. Harry almost groaned in annoyance; just great, a debt.

...Which probably meant he was at the Weasley house.

"Lay him on the couch," A female voice said. "I'll be in the kitchen... George, honestly. I don't know if tying that snake to his arm is your idea of a joke, but this isn't the time..."

"It's not me, mom!!" The twin's voice said. "He had that snake on when we got him out of there! And it almost bit my hand off when I tried to take it off!"

Harry would have smirked had his face not felt like it was made out of metal.

"It's his pet." A voice Harry easily recognized as Ron's, said. "I saw it last year. Gave 'mione and I quite a scare, too."

"Fhmm... I hope it's safe."

"Nooo, I'll jussst go right up and tear you a new one, chhhubby." Nemesis's voice hissed sarcastically.

He felt someone take his hand and hoped fervently it wasn't one of the brothers.

"He's so thin... what in the name of Merlin's staff have they been feeding him!?"

"I don't think it's much of anything." One of the twins said. While identifying them with the eyes open was a feat, doing so with closed eyes was nearly impossible.

"That *almost* excuses your behavior, although you *could* have rescued him some other way." The voice he identified as Mrs Weasley said. "Now, the three of you go out and de-gnome the garden... and no deserts!"

The three boys groaned and heavy footsteps made their way away.

"Disgusting what those stupid people did to him..." Mrs Weasley grumbled. He felt a hand feel his ribs. "Mustn't have been fed correctly for a week!"

"What's going on?" Another female voice, much higher than the previous one, asked, before gasping. "Is that..."

"Yes... your brothers fetched him last night. Don't disturb them, they'll miss a few gnomes."

"Y-Yes mom."

"He's got five brothers and one little sister. She'll be here next year." Hermione had said, last year.

...so that was *probably* the little sister, unless the other brother had a *really* high set voice. Or wore tights.

After another feel of his ribs, Mrs Weasley let out a disgusted grumble. "Ginny, you make sure he gets everything he wants. In his condition, he shouldn't even *try* to move."

"Y-Y... 'kay..." The girl did an excellent impersonation of Quirrell.

"Oh, and Harry? No need to hide that you're awake." The woman added, before leaving.

In surprise, Harry's eyes whipped open, only to regret it as light flooded his eyes. He groaned and looked away from the offending window. Quick steps ran straight to it and the sound of moving cloth was heard. The light dimmed enough for Harry to try to look around, only to see nothing but blurs. For a moment, he was afraid he had gone blind out of malnutrition, but then remembered he wore glasses, which were currently absent from his face.

"erm... Ginny?" He croaked. "...glasses..."

'God I sound like an idiot...' he grumbled mentally.

The girl 'eep'ed and, not a second later, a shaking pair of hands put the glasses on his face. Smiling slightly, he took his first look at her.

'Yup, a Weasley.' Was his first impression.

She had the freckles and long, red hair typical to a Weasley, framing a round face decorated by worried-looking brown eyes. She was dressed in a pink, old robe that seemed faded on many spots.

...other interesting detail, the fierce blush covering her cheeks was something to be noted and revered in it's redness. It nearly could compete with the girl's hair.

Harry smiled a bit and nodded. "Thank you." He croaked, before clearing his throat. "Erm.. could I get something to drink, please?"

The girl nodded very, very quickly – Harry expected her to knock herself out from the whiplash – and scampered away in the kitchen. The boy couldn't help but chuckle amusedly.

Few minutes later, the girl carefully trekked back, carrying a... *gulp* rather very full glass of water. If by that you mean filled to the brim and beyond. It looked like the girl had forgot it under the water. Dunking it in a well would have done the same drenching effect.

"H-h-here y-you g-go!" She stuttered, handing him the water rather roughly... and spilling half of it all over him. "S-SORRY!!" She squeaked.

Harry grinned pleasantly, shrugging. "I needed a shower anyway." He noted.

...yes, it was so much fun to toy with crushing girls. Just seeing that already phenomenal blush get worse was something enjoyable.

Harry had to hand it to the Weasley family. Their house was small, cozy and had that warm atmosphere that just screamed “HOME!” with a megaphone and rock concert speakers. While they didn’t have much, they used whatever they had to the maximum, and knew how to make someone feel welcome, although he knew the feeling was unanimous; The prefect Weasley, who was called Percy – Harry had to resist an almighty snigger when the boy had curtsied and declared his name like a royal letter – obviously didn’t trust him and/or Nemesis.

“Why don’t you take that... *thing* out before it bites someone?” The boy had ‘proposed’ in tones more likely to be used by aunt Petunia. “Who knows what kind of diseases it can carry!”

“Lesss zzzan you, you walking carrot!” The snake retorted. Harry barely resisted a snigger at the mental picture.

“Don’t worry Weasley, he’s perfectly safe.” Harry reassured him. “As long as you can it with the insults.”

The boy paled a couple of shades and quickly left. Harry almost expected to hear a wail of ‘MOOOM! That bad Slytherin’s playing with simple mind!’.

Everything in the house seemed completely out of control. The Dursleys had always wanted *everything* to be completely still; Harry expected them to hire a scientist to stop gravity and time in their house – in perfectly muggle ways of course – anytime soon. Even the Zabini’s house had a sense of order to it, although the last time he had seen it, it had been half littered with unopened boxes from their recent move.

No. The Burrow was, bar Hogwarts, the most chaotic area he had ever seen. Although he felt quite too weak to move, more than once he asked the little Ginny “What was that?” after hearing either an explosion – “Fred and George’s room... nobody quite knows what they’re doing in there” – metallic clangs – “The ghoul in the attic. It makes noise whenever it feels it’s too calm in here.” – or voices – “It’s

probably the mirror yelling at Ron about either his jacket, pants or hair, whichever it thinks is worse."

Each reply said with an air of banality as if all of this was perfectly normal.

...and he soon learned it was.

For the first few days, he was bedridden to the couch in the living room, which was rendered highly comfortable by a few well maintained cushioning charms, probably the same ones preventing him from feeling the springs of the old and battered sofa.. His first meeting with Mr Weasley was a rather interesting one, as Ginny had been by his side, asking him if he wanted something.

Ron had promptly assigned to that duty, much to both boy's annoyance. Ginny was much more fun to play around with, while Ron didn't at all want to play his lapdog. Add to it the fact that most of their time was spent playing chess, it made Harry want to smash those darn pawns with something else than the queen's club.

And Weasley *had* to win and rub it in every time.

Great friend he was, if you weren't playing chess against him.

Fortunately, after the first week had passed, Harry was finally allowed to move around by 'nurse Molly'. It wasn't that he didn't like her, certainly not. She was nice, friendly, a much, much better cook than Petunia ever was, probably coming from years of experience stuffing eight hungry mouths and *cared* about him, which was a nice change from the Dursleys.

...however, she also had a protective streak larger than madam Pomfrey's, and while she was even *smaller* than Harry, that glare of hers...

Harry still shuddered at the thought.

A week and a half after his installation in the Burrow, an owl flew straight at him during a Quidditch game, chaser only. While Harry was very confident in his abilities as Seeker, being a Chaser was an entirely different story; Little Ginny, who stubbornly decided to play, was even better than he was.

"If the Gryffs use *her* on their team, we *might* be in trouble." Harry grumbled under his breath.

He easily recognized the owl. An eagle owl with creamy white feathers with brown wings, along with red eyes and a killer glare, it was the Zabini family's owl, Athena. She landed on his arm and held out a letter for him.

"Ok, ok... let me land first." He said, heading down. The owl rolled her eyes and lowered it's talon.

As soon as he landed, she cut the small rope holding the letter to her talon with her beak, dropping it in his hand, before stretching her wings and leaving. Harry had the feeling the owl didn't like him much, for some reason.

Harry shrugged. Antisocialism was apparently *not* a solely human concept.

Unfolding the letter, he was surprised to see a dark green bandanna fall on the floor. Noting that the paper had writing on it, he began to read.

Harry,

WE'RE BACK!!! The word was written at least six times, tainting the letter on the other side. Harry chuckled. *Heard you got rescued by the Dursleys. We would have cursed them, but they were already gone... they bought a villa in a place called Majorca, to use as a summer house away from us. Useless fat cowards they are.*

I had sent you a birthday present, but when we arrived, it was on the table, along with the rest of your presents. We have no idea how this

could have happened, but I do think that you know, and that you're going to tell me. Otherwise, I can't assure your safety.

We'll be coming over the burrow tomorrow, with the presents. Get ready for a belated birthday party, Potter-boy!

Oh, and the bandanna's your present from me; with that, people won't be able to stare at your scar.

Love,

Blaise.

Harry gave a mental thank you at Blaise, looking at the bandanna. It was dark green, a perfect tone for a Slytherin, and bore the emblem of a silver snake, coiled up and ready to strike. He liked it. A second later, it was over his forehead.

The next morning, Harry found himself being woken up by frantic shaking from his roommate.

"C'mon, you log!" Ron said. "Wake up!"

"Weasley, shake me one more time and I swear I'll tie your arms so far behind your back you'll be able to touch the big Ben and the Eiffel tower at the same time!" The black-haired boy growled, glaring at his friend.

For good measure, Ron gave him a rough shove that sent him sprawling back in his pillow. Harry almost fell asleep again, but the impact of another pillow against his nose prevented said rest from happening.

Annoyed, Harry opened his eyes. The sky visible through the thin curtains covering the window on the tilted roof hadn't even lost that yellow morning tint. The sun had barely got up.

"What are you waking me up for?!" Harry growled, sitting up. Nemesis was still well coiled in the makeshift bed, which was only a

transfigured rug forming a mattress and one of the older brother's – who didn't live in the house anymore – blankets. Much more luxurious than a cupboard, that much was certain.

"Your birthday, you dope!" Ron said.

"Ehh?" Harry blinked, remembering the letter. "Oh! Yeah..."

"Geez, aren't you the bright and early one."

"Exactly. I'm *not*. Waking up a five bloody hours in the morning is *not* my idea of the best way to start a morning."

"Actually, it's six thirty. Mrs Zabini wrote and said she'd be coming extra-early, saying that Blaise wanted to catch up to you."

"Blaise? Waking up early? Not likely." Harry noted.

After getting dressed, the two boys went down in the kitchen, where the rather enormous family, not in the fat sense, but in the numerous sense, was seated, already busy devouring whatever food those long, lanky arms could reach. Harry and Ron sat on side-by-side seats, between Ginny and George... or was it Fred?

...not that it matters much...

Ok. One of the twins. In front of him, Harry had to handle looking at Percy Weasley cutting his egg with a *knife*, sitting on the height of arrogance. And on the other side of the prefect, the other twin was exaggeratedly imitating his older brother, opening his mouth large enough to make adventurers believe it was a safe cave for the night and chewing so obviously a goat would have been jealous. All of this under the annoyed stare of Mrs Weasley, and the amused chuckles of he-who-wears-the-skirt, Mr Weasley.

...figuratively, of course.

...hopefully.

...not that he was interested in what kinky games those two might have in mind.

...but I'm getting out of the subject here.

Harry caught himself grinning rather stupidly most of the breakfast. While, at the Zabini's, it hadn't been anything boring, having breakfast with the crazy, out of control bunch of Gryffindors the Weasley family were was an experience by itself.

...Especially thanks to the twins, and particularly when the prefect had noticed his twin brother's antics and had chewed him up on how important manners were before guests – although he had been far from being a good example beforehand – completely missing the other twin switching his toast for a rather realistic-looking identical roasted slice of bread... made out of rubber, of course.

Which the prefect had almost finished eating, all the while commenting on the freshness of said toast, when the guilty twin revealed his prank.

Brown freckles stand out on a pale face, did you know that, dear reader?

As the prefect brother ran off to empty his stomach, Harry heard a loud fiery rushing sound, coming from the living room.

“What the...”

“Ah, that must be the Zabinis!” Mr Weasley said with a smile, getting up.

Harry immediately understood. Floo powder. He had taken the bumpy mean of transportation the previous year.

A rather loud “Thump” was heard, accompanied by some unladylike cursing that could only have come from Blaise’s mouth. Another thump came, then another, before a quite annoyed

“Will you two kindly get off of me?!”

came to the kitchen.

Harry felt his heart soar. Quickly, he pushed himself away from the table and dashed into the living room, where a disgruntled Blaise was being helped up by her father.

She hadn’t changed much in the month he hadn’t been able to see her. Her skin was slightly more tanned than he had expected it to be; from what she had written, she had been locked indoors most of the time. Her wild mane of cherry-black hair was exactly as he remembered it, and so were her annoyed, chestnut-brown eyes.

Mrs Zabini, who was currently chuckling nervously, under the frown of her daughter, was also more tanned than he remembered, although not nearly as much as Blaise was. With those two standing side-by-side, it was almost like seeing the same person argue with a smaller version of itself – or taller, you choose. Only Mrs Zabini’s dark green eyes were different.

And watching it all, with a dejected sigh, Mr Zabini passed a hand through his black hair, his black eyes rolling upwards in exasperation. He gave a small smile at Harry,

“Be glad you didn’t have to stand *this* during the whole summer.” He mouthed, causing the black-haired youth to snort.

Blaise’s eyes turned toward him and her small frown turned into a delighted grin.

“Harry!!” She shrieked, bounding forward and tackling him straight to the floor, hugging him tightly.

“O-Oi!” Harry blushed. “What’s *that* for?”

“What, can’t be happy to see you?” Blaise asked.

"You can, but you can be happy to see me *without* trying to kill me!"

The girl snickered and got up, pulling him upwards with her. She patted his ribs and growled.

"Next time I see the Dursleys, they're in for a nasty surprise." She mumbled.

"Ran off to Majorca, did they?"

"Heard they'll stay there during the summers. I don't know if I should be glad or happy. I mean, great, we won't see them, but how are we supposed to get our revenge?"

Harry smirked back. "Oh, we will, Blaise. Nobody messes with us Slyths and gets away with it."

"Slyths?" Ginny asked from behind Harry. "You're a Slytherin?"

"Was, Am and Will be. And proud of it, too." The boy replied with a small smirk and wink.

Blaise whipped her hands around Harry's neck in a playful hug, looking at Ginny from over his shoulder, a glint in her eyes not unlike a butcher before a piece of meat.

"And same goes for me." She said, smirking. "Snakes all the way."

The red-head girl suddenly looked quite uneasy. With a small "scuse me", she dashed up the twisting stairway, up to her room. Blaise gave a snort.

"Yup, Gryffindor all the way. She wouldn't last half a second on Slytherin." Blaise said.

"Well, you never know... 'Beware the quiet ones'." Harry quoted.

"Ginny? *Quiet*!?" Ron asked disbelievingly.

"My point exactly. You never know how right she might be. Very, extremely or completely." Harry said, sending his two friends in laughter.

Blaise was the first to recover, giving a look at Harry and noting, with visible glee, that he was wearing the bandanna.

"So?" Blaise asked, pointing at it. "How is it?"

"Feels a bit weird, but I think I'll get used to it." He replied with a grin. "Thanks, it'll make going out in public a much more comfortable thing."

"Yes, mister Super star. Would you like your false nose and mustache, too?" Ron asked with a wry grin.

Harry snorted. *Ron was trying to sound cleaver?*

'Poor sod is being corrupted, and he doesn't even notice it.' Harry thought with a mental smirk.

"Ok, then, you got Blaise's present." Mrs Zabini said. "Now, it's time to open the others."

And only now did Harry notice the trunk. It looked like any other trunk, except for the fact that it had seven locks instead of just one. The woman took out a key and placed it in front of the locks.

"Lessee... was it the third..."

"Fifth, love." Mr Zabini reminded.

"Oh, right." She mumbled, turning the fifth lock before opening the trunk, revealing...

...clothes. Lots of them.

And not all of them were mentionnables.

"That was the second lock, Elmira." Mr Zabini noted with a slight smirk.

Grumbling and blushing slightly, making sure to hide what looked like a rather... skimpy outfit, Mrs Zabini shut the trunk with a thud, opening the lock on the other side before opening it again.

And the content was different.

Instead of robes, shirts, pants and unmentionables, a pile of wrapped up presents welcomed him.

A minute later, Harry was greedily ripping the wrapping to shred, ignoring the burrowed Nemesis's complaints and continuing to pile up the unfortunate paper on top of him. Hermione had sent him a book, big surprise, called "Useful, practical or just plain nasty Hexes and curses, edition 1992.", along with a recommendation to "Please not use it at Hogwarts."

...which was thoroughly ignored.

Hagrid had sent him a bunch of his culinary wonders, the rock cakes, called this way because of their ability to efficiently emulate the wonders of masonry. Of course, this also meant that it was perfectly impossible to eat, unless you had teeth of steel and a stomach of titanium. Which Harry didn't.

Ron had given him a book on Quidditch. Of course, it didn't have any strategies, at least not for seekers. It was also concentrated on the Chudley cannons, which was *not* Harry's favorite team. By far.

His Hogwarts letter was also on the pile; apparently, he had received it on his birthday, like the first one. The shopping list felt unusually heavy, however. With puzzlement, he unfolded the letter.

"Err..." Ron suddenly emitted.

"Don't tell me you didn't read it." Blaise said.

Ron grumbled. "With all the mess around getting Harry back, I forgot all about it."

"You and us, both." Fred and George chorused rather eerily. Harry gave a look at them, wondering if they were one of those pairs who could read each other's minds.

For their sake, Harry read it out loud.

“Mister Potter

It's our pleasure to inform you that you've been allowed to continue your education at Hogwarts, school of yada yada yada, always the same stuff, platform 9¾ at 11. Geez, old McGonnaFlip must get bored to write always the same thing year after year.”

Ron snorted, under the disapproving glance of his mother and Percy. Harry returned to the letter.

“Second year students must also acquire the following books:

Standard book of spells, grade 2 by Miranda Goshawk

Break with the banshees by Gilderoy Lockhart

Gadding with Ghouls by Gilderoy Lockhart

Holidays with Hags by Gilderoy Lockhart

Travels with Trolls by Gilderoy Lockhart

Voyages with Vampires by Gilderoy Lockhart

Wandering with Werewolves by Gilderoy Lockhart

And a *Year with the Yeti* by... guess who? Yes! *Gilderoy Lockhart*, you guessed right. Sheesh, how many books did that guy write?!”

“Lots.” Fred flatly replied.

“Well, he *is* quite talented. He knows *everything* about dangerous creatures.”

Mrs Zabini snorted. “That's not how I remember him. Last I heard, he's the one responsible for turning Flitwick's hair white. A complete failure in anything that requires a wand.”

Mrs Weasley gave the other woman a wounded look, clutching *“Gilderoy Lockhart's guide to household pets”* in her arms. The man in the picture, a blue-eyed, blonde man with a blindingly white smile,

gave a wink at them, bending so he could see them under Mrs Weasley's arms.

"Last time you saw him, he was just a second year." Mrs Weasley defended. "He must have got better."

Mrs Zabini shrugged. "I'll keep my opinions until I see how he is in action."

"Whoever our new teacher is, it's a Lockhart fan." Ron noted.

"Probably a woman." Harry guessed. "I hope he at least *knows* what he's doing in those books, if we're going to be using those to learn."

"One thing's for sure," Blaise said. "this sure is a great way for Lockhart to make easy money. Think about it, if every student of Hogwarts buys all those books..."

Fred and George gave each other thoughtful looks, along with small smirks.

"course, you need to actually be able to write decently." Blaise added, giving them a smirk. "And teach."

The two twins' face fell. Apparently, they did *not* want to write anything even remotely educational.

Soon, Blaise had took out the vacation pictures she had taken with her magical camera, the same one she had received for Christmas the previous year.

"This is mom's sister, Esta. She's the *only* one who's actually fun to be around with. Problem is, she lives a bit far from Rome, where all the others live. We didn't stay very long there."

Giving a look at the picture, Harry saw a small, short dark cherry-haired woman giving a large smile at the camera while waving cheerfully. Behind her and a small cottage that was evidently her house, alpine mountains could be seen.

He flipped the photograph to look at the title.

“Auntie Esta Zabini!” Was written in Blaise’s scrawl.

“Zabini?” Harry asked, looking up. “How come she’s got your name? Aren’t your parents married?”

“I asked mom about that, she said dad’s the one who changed his name at marriage.” The girl replied. “Something about legal reasons. I didn’t ask more.”

While, except for this one, the pictures of her family on the wizarding side were rather dull – Where the *heck* did Mrs Zabini get that active gene from?! – the other side was all the opposite.

“All of dad’s brothers and sisters decided to live near the coast, except for the youngest one. Heard he decided to head somewhere in France, we don’t get much news from him.” She said. “You have *no* idea how much I swam!!”

“Isn’t the Mediterranean all... dirty and polluted?” Harry asked.

“Yeah, well... Mom casts quick cleaning wards on the water every time she goes there. Not too big, just enough to be fun.” Blaise explained. “course, keep it quiet, she’s not supposed to do magic in front of muggles, even if they know about he—aahh, hello Mister Weasley!!” Blaise suddenly seemed extremely sheepish, before clearing her face and taking an expressionless mask to gaze at the tall Weasley patriarch.

The man snorted. “I’m in charge of that in Britain. *Not* in Italy. She can do whatever she wants over there, as long as she doesn’t get caught by those authorities.”

“Arthur!!” Molly Weasley, in the kitchen close by, gasped in shocked exasperation.

“Erm... I mean... it’s veeeery bad, Mrs Zabini.” He told her to where she was, watching her husband help an unwilling and embarrassed Mrs Weasley cook – “I really don’t mind, I always cook at home... though you *do* cook faster than me with all that magic.”

Blaise's mother snorted. "Indeed. And please, call me Elmira, Mr Weasley."

"Only if you call me Arthur."

The afternoon was spent playing Quidditch. Blaise, Harry and Ron faced off against Fred, George and Ginny in a simple two chaser game, which, mostly because of the little girl, ended in the twins' favor.

"Serious potential competition, that girl." Blaise noted, flying down from her defense of the hoops. "Let's hope she doesn't pull a Potter and ends up flying against us in her first year."

"Thought as much." Harry agreed.

Supper was just as lively as breakfast and dinner. Percy declared, loudly and pompously in the middle of the meal, that he had *homework* – and the word was said in such a fashion it made Harry start to wonder if having to do homework had become an honor – and that he was going back to his room, removing the twins' best source of entertainment.

...which was probably the whole point. Looking like an idiot in front of family was bad enough. In front of guests, it would probably be horrid, at least to the stuck-up prefect Weasley.

Shining in his absence, Percy left the way clear for the twins to annoy their second favorite victim, Ginny. Of course, Harry decided to humor the girl and defended her, just to see that cardinal tint on her cheeks. Blaise, seeing the effect Harry was having on her, snickered.

"You're a mean, mean evil bastard." She whispered.

"Thank you so very much." Harry replied.

The adults were all loudly speaking on their side. Their jobs, the recent rises in prices, the magico-political situation –“Fudge is an absolute idiot. ‘nuff said.”– were all used subjects, with many others skipped, as Harry wasn’t paying too much attention to them. However, he *did* notice that Mrs Zabini’s glass *never* had the same level of wine in it each time he looked, whether it be more or less, while Mr Zabini’s glass was empty and staying that way.

...as the night progressed, the woman’s face was getting more and more flushed. Her speech, so Harry noticed, also became sloppy. Fortunately, the topic stayed in sane levels; his mind would have stood up to the challenge of hearing her make loud declaration on something private, say, her night life.

In the middle of a tirade against Fudge – it seemed she had quite a healthy dislike for the man, whether she was drunk or not – to the embarrassment of her husband, her speech suddenly dropped. So did her head, actually.

Thump

Blaise groaned and sighed, rubbing her temples. “Mooom...” She sighed.

“...does that happen often?” Harry asked incredulously.

“Not really, but it so embarrassing when it does.” She replied. “She can’t keep her liquor.”

“Can’t cook, can’t play music, can’t hold her liquor and has a temper to kill.” Ron listed.

Blaise gave him a deadly glare. “Don’t you *dare* comment on my mother, freckle-boy.”

“I wasn’t!” He defended himself vehemently, before throwing himself directly in the fire pit with a misplaced “I was wondering exactly *how much* of her *you* take after.”

After Ron received a sharp slap behind the head, courtesy of a bright pink Blaise who was under the twins' general guffaws, Mr Weasley turned toward Mr Zabini.

"Dario, I think it's best if you and your wife stay here for the night."

"Oh, no, really, I wouldn't—"

"Please." Mrs Weasley insisted. "It's not a bother at all."

Harry gave a look at the either damaged or outdated furniture, then at the obviously poor, yet homey environment of the burrow.

'No wonder they're poor... they're so generous.' Harry mused, before snorting. 'They're targets for suckers. A Slytherin in their family would do them some good.'

Mr Zabini gave in after Mrs Zabini attempted to roll to rest her other side, her subconscious not being informed that the chair was on was certainly *not* a large bed. Few minutes later, she was picked off the floor and taken to the empty room that used to belong to Bill Weasley, the eldest brother currently working in Egypt.

"Blaise, I hope you don't mind sleeping in Ginny's room." Mrs Weasley said. "we *would* give you Charlie's room, but I'm afraid of what kind of secrets you can find in that pigsty."

Blaise snorted and nodded, turning to Ginny. "if it's all right with her."

"It's ok." She replied.

Harry went to sleep that night, completely exhausted. The party had lasted what felt like forever. His body felt like a bag of lead by the time he crashed in his bed, and he didn't wake up until the next century or later.

Slowly, he felt himself relax. The night was a bit warm, but the cool breeze floating through the open window on the wall cooled the air down just enough to make it comfortable for the two boys.

Slowly, Harry felt his body relax. The pains of the day eased away, replaced by a pleasurable numbness. He closed his eyes, concentrating only on the mild sounds of the house; the ticking of the pendulum-less, numberless clock downstairs, the small snoring of the other boy in the room, the chirping of crickets from outside, accompanied by the splashing of something falling in the water...

...eh?

Harry blinked and, curious, sat up to look outside through the window. Annoyed of being too short, he had to get up to get a good look at something else than the full moon.

There, by the river running between the magical farm and the nearby town, was a single, blurry... ehh... something. After putting his glasses on, Harry managed to identify it as human, but it was too far to make out who.

'A Thief, maybe?' Harry thought, frowning. The Weasley family already didn't have much, he wasn't about to let some thief take something else.

...and besides, he had a debt to settle.

Wand in hand, Harry slipped down the stairs, after making sure to put on socks for silence's sake. The steps were a bit creaky, so Harry made sure to be as light as he could; no need waking the Weasleys up.

With no interruptions except for his near miss at murdering Errol, the Weasley's old owl, by trampling, he made it outside, where he was grateful it hadn't rained in a while. Having his socks wet wouldn't have been a good thing at all.

He easily reached the river, whereupon he analyzed his target.

...it was Blaise.

Relaxing his hold on his wand, Harry let it slip into his pocket, before clearing his throat, attracting her attention.

Normally, Blaise, at that, would have jumped, glared at him and told him – Verbally accompanied with a tap behind the head – not to startle her.

...normally.

She barely jumped, turning to face him with wide awake brown eyes.

“Harry! I didn’t hear you.”

Harry shrugged nonchalantly, walking up to her. “I’m good at not being noticed.”

She gave him a disbelieving look. He blushed slightly.

“...when people aren’t looking at my scar, I mean. And when I’m not kicking ass or taking the snitch or... ugh. You know what I mean.”

The girl giggled and patted the grass at her side, where Harry sat down. For a moment, neither talked. Blaise was unnaturally calm, and he couldn’t help but wonder why. Absentmindedly, the girl flicked a small stone in the river, staring at the reflect of the moon.

“You’re being awfully silent tonight.” Harry noted.

Blaise shrugged and lay down on her back, staring at the sky. “It’s a full moon.”

“So? Don’t tell me you started taking astronomy seriously.” Harry teased.

The girl smiled a bit and shook her head. “Naa. Not in this lifetime anyway. Maybe if I come back as a centaur though.”

Both chuckled a bit, Harry laying down beside her. The grass around the river was a bit more humid and cold than the one around the farm, but not that much. It was an awfully hot summer.

"I've always felt calmer during full moon nights." Blaise declared.
"Don't ask me why, it's one of the few things I don't have in common
with my mom."

"What? She's never calm?"

"Are you kidding me?" She asked disbelievingly. "Getting drunk at an acquaintance's house in front of her own daughter, and you *think* she might be calm *sometimes*?" Her tone didn't have any bitterness to it. All the contrary, in fact. She was downright holding her laughter.

"I guess I can't even picture it. Except if she's sleeping."

"Then you've never heard of that time when she fell off the bed and pulled dad down with her." Blaise noted, chuckling, looking back up.

"Must have been quite a sight." Harry mused, imitating her.

"Oh, I didn't actually see it, but I heard plenty enough."

After a short bout of laughter, Harry turned to Blaise.

"Your mom has to be the coolest adult ever."

"I second that notion." Blaise agreed.

And, a short while later, the two fell asleep under the starry night, Harry wondering of how his life would have been had he been raised by the Zabinis.

'She's the coolest, when she isn't embarrassing herself.' Was Harry's last thought.

*“The **famous** Harry Potter... can’t even get in a library without making the front page.”*

Draco Malfoy, Harry Potter et la Chambre des Secrets, page 71

Chapter 3: Brawl Between the Books

“Now, you remember how it works, right Harry?”

“Yes, mrs Zabini. How could I forget my *favorite* mean of transportation.”

Harry’s tone dripped in sarcasm as his hand dug in the small pot containing Floo powder. As much as he detested the bumpy, spinny, speedy and dirty traveling method, he had to agree that it was the fastest – and safest; 11 people flying on brooms in the air were *not* likely to go unnoticed by the muggles.

It was now two days after Mrs Zabini’s horrible hangover. Blaise had went back to her usual, sarcastic an hyperactive self as soon as they had woken up, panicking about ‘what will mom think if she sees us like this’, to which Harry had calmly replied that ‘It’s still early enough to make it to Ginny’s room’.

Their nightly excursion had gone unnoticed, although Ginny *did* seem to be a bit less friendly to Blaise. Her smiles had been a bit crisped all day, at least until Harry had pointed it out, whereupon the ‘forget me not’ bright crimson blush had appeared again.

And here he was, Harry Potter, the boy-who-lived, staring a bit fearfully at the glittering powder in his hand, standing in front of the fireplace where, not a minute ago, Percy had gone through, brandishing his shiny Prefect badge between him and the two Slytherins like some kind of spiritual ward.

“We haven’t got all day, Harry.” Ron said.

“Is ickle Harry-duddy afraid of the little burny-burny?” Fred – or was it George? – sing-sang teasingly.

Grumbling, Harry remembered the simple steps for use of Floo powder.

1: Put the powder in the fire, wait until it turns green

2: Step in the fire. If step one is done incorrectly, you should start to feel a slight burning

3: Take a deep breath and clearly yell where you want to go

Listening to the instruction playing in his mind, he spread the powder all over the flames, waiting until they had turned bright emerald and that no heat came from them anymore. He then stepped inside the fireplace and...

“*cough*iagonalle*cough*”

...perhaps the deep breath was to be taken *before* walking in the fire.

The Floo network was a great thing, once you got used to its oddities – and alikeness to a wild rollercoaster ride. It practically warped you

to anywhere you wanted in England, as long as the destination had a fireplace connected to it.

...unfortunately, it did *not* come with a “Destination unclear, please repeat” feature.

And so, when Harry stumbled out of the fireplace, it was *not* in the cozy environment of the leaky cauldron, but instead in a dark, gloomy, dusty shop. His glasses slid from his nose, but with Quidditch reflexes taught/crammed by Flint, he managed to catch them before they broke. After making sure nobody had seen him, he allowed himself a look around.

Immediately, he wished he hadn’t.

Bizarre and downright creepy objects were displayed around the shop, ranging from gross shrunken heads and seemed to scream in agony to skeletal hands, which made a grab for Harry which he barely dodged.

“Tshhheerfffu placcce.” Nemesis deadpanned.

The back of the shop was a simple wooden counter that must have had seen better days; Harry feared that, should he put his hand on it, he’d still be pulling out splinters in his tomb. As for the front, it was a wall pierced by a single door partially blocked by a black curtain, surrounded by two just as identically curtained windows. By partially, I mean that Harry was still able to see rather creepy blurs through the thin curtains, just enough to know that someone was approaching.

With a barely audible swallow, Harry looked around for somewhere to hide. Footsteps came from behind the counter as the owner began approaching. He spotted a cupboard at his right. Hoping it wasn’t holding something as creepy as the rest of the shop, Harry opened its door and, without looking inside, slipped in, partially closing the door as to not make any noise.

“Hello there, how ma... that’s odd, I could have sworn someone had come in through floo...” The owner, whom Harry couldn’t see, mumbled to himself.

Chimes suddenly came as the door opened. The hiding boy managed to see who it was through the small opening. He cursed his bad luck; it just *had* to be someone who hated him, right?

It was Lucius Malfoy.

Oh, and Draco, too.

Smiling slightly upon seeing his friend, but cursing that he wasn't able to talk to him, Harry sat back to sulk in his cupboard.

'What's with me and being stuck in those anyway?' He wondered.

"Ah, mister Malfoy..." The owner said. "What a pleasure to see you again. And young mister Malfoy is here as well! How delightful! Oh, I just *have* to show you something I managed to get just today, at a very reasonable price, of course..."

"Sorry, Mr Borgin," Mr Malfoy interrupted coldly. "but I'm not buying. I'm selling."

"Ah, you're selling."

Harry felt the man's enthusiasm dropping to the basement and below. Draco, meanwhile, had started walking his way, checking out the various items on sale. The expression on his face betrayed boredom, but Harry, who was well used to his friend's mask, could see a well hidden dose of disgust as he analyzed the shrunken heads.

"I believe you're aware that the number of searches the ministry is undertaking is multiplying." The sound of unrolling parchment came to his ears as Mr Malfoy continued. "It just so happens that I have a few... say... objects, that might cause me eventual problems should the ministry..."

Draco had, by now, reached the front of his cupboard. He was about to open the cupboard when Harry slipped his hand out to ward him away. Eyes wide open, Draco peered in through the small opening, nearly gasping in surprise. Harry shushed him with his finger and shooed him away with his hand, silently telling him to continue

exploring. Draco gave a nearly invisible nod, his frown returning but with a small smile.

“The ministry wouldn’t dare search *your* house now, would it, sir?”

“No one came yet, our family name still weights a lot of respect. But the ministry is getting more and more stubborn and sticking it’s nose deeper than it should... They’re talking about a new muggle-protection act... I don’t doubt that that ragged fool Arthur Weasley is behind all this, that muggle-loving imbecile... Well, as you can see, some of these poisons could let one think...”

“Ah, yes... I see... Well, I already have a lot of Sleeping death, so I doubt I’d be able to give you a high price for—”

“What’s that?” Draco suddenly demanded, pointing at a disembodied, skeletal hand laying on a pillow.

“Ahh!” Mr Borgin suddenly barged into view, moving his long, grey, oily hair from in front of his face. With a hunched back, the man picked up the hand, carefully showing it to the two Malfoys. “This is the hand of glory!”

Harry almost snorted. Figures it’d have a corny name.

“When a candle is put in it, only it’s holder may see it’s light, no one else... an excellent item for thieves and pillagers, your son had great taste, mr Malfoy.”

Harry mentally agreed. Such an object would be *quite* useful during nightly adventures like he was, if last year’s happenings were to be believed, certain to have.

“Well, I hope that *great taste* will be used in something *else* than petty thievery.” The man declared with a small frown.

“Oh, I didn’t mean to object you, mr Malfoy...” Mr Borgin began, but was interrupted.

“Although that *may* just be what’s waiting for him if he doesn’t get better grades.” Draco’s father said coldly, crossing his arms and

glaring at the boy, who stared down at the floor. Harry could easily see how angry his friend was getting.

“It’s not *my* fault Granger’s got better grades than me, I mean *c’mom!* She’s a walking encyclopedia! It’s like studying is the only life she has. Should have been a Ravenclaw.”

“None the less, I find it *very* disappointing that a *Mudblood* has better grades than my son by over twenty-five points.”

Harry mentally wondered since when ninety percent was a bad score.

“It’s not my fault, she’s a bloody *genius!*”

“Mudbloods are *not* geniuses, Draco!” Mr Malfoy snapped. “Now be silent. I have to conclude this deal. We are a little in a rush.”

“Very well.” Mr Borgin said, visibly angry at having missed a sell.

As the two began to haggle, a bored Draco Malfoy shot a look at Harry, then back at his father, only to see he was currently very busy debating why a dose of lung-shrinking poison couldn’t be sold only ten galleon. He turned toward his friend again, mouthing:

‘What are you doing here?!’

To which Harry replied:

‘Floo powder. Wrong chimney.’

Draco snorted, before turning toward his father, who, thankfully, hadn’t noticed. With a sigh of relief, he mouthed

‘Talk to you later. Flourish & Blotts.’

Harry nodded in agreement, just as Mr Malfoy declared “Deal.” and turned toward Draco. “Come, Draco. We have other things to do.”

Before opening the door, Mr Malfoy gave a last look at Mr Borgin and declared:

"I'll be waiting for you at the manor tomorrow to pick everything up. Have a nice day."

As soon as the door was closed and the Malfoys gone, Mr Borgin's voice came back, but in a grumbling that had nothing similar to the coaxing tone from before.

"Nice day yourself, *mister* Malfoy." Harry heard. "If what they say is true, what you sold me isn't even *half* of what you hide in that *manor* of yours."

His grumbles became incomprehensible as the man left, walking further away. After waiting to make sure he wouldn't come back, Harry silently slid out of the cupboard and, avoiding the displayed objects – and hands that tried to grab him again – he left through the front door.

The street beyond had the same 'cheerful' atmosphere as the shop he had just left, which was called Borgin and Burkes. He was standing in a small, rickety backstreet with shops on both sides. The merchandises displayed did nothing to dampen the oh-so-cheerful mood either. Live spiders, red-eyed skulls and pumpkins with snarls that wouldn't even be welcome at Halloween were being watched by odd, suspicious and shady characters, most of them in black cloaks hiding their faces. None of which would probably be very happy to see the 'boy-who-lived' there.

Fortunately, Harry was still wearing the bandanna Blaise had given him. People *did* give him second glances; after all, what on earth is a twelve years old kid doing in a place like this? But Harry suddenly got an idea.

"*Vox Diabolus*" He whispered, pointing his wand at himself.

"What are you doing here, kid?" A dark cloaked figure asked, stepping into his path. "Got lost?"

"I know perfectly well where I am, mortal." Harry growled; his spell had worked. His voice echoed a bit like it was expected from a stereotyped demon. "Get out of my path."

And the figure, after a rather squeaky apology, made itself scarce. Harry chuckled, accidentally scaring a strange-looking saleswitch into dropping her tray of human fingernails on the floor. After a quick look around, he turned toward the witch, who was staring at him, evidently terrified.

"Which way to Diagon Alley?" He asked.

"T...T...Tha...That w-way..." She blurted, pointing with her left hand, her eyes shut and sealed tight.

With a small nod, he went the way she had pointed, noticing that people strayed from his way. Wondering to himself how come they were all so... *horrified*, he made it to the small stairway heading out of the alley. As he was about to climb the last step, he bumped right into someone. A very *large* someone.

"Watch it... Hagrid!" He gasped and smiled widely, temporarily forgetting about his voice.

"Eh? What the..." The large man wondered, stepping backwards. Few people were already staring at him, already looking scared.

"Erm... whoops." Pointing his wand at his throat, he mumbled "*Finite Incantatem*." And let the small sparks of green magic remove the charm he had put there. "It's me, Harry!" He said, noticing with joy that his voice was back to normal.

"Ha—Harry?" Hagrid stammered in disbelief, staring at the boy's bandanna-clad forehead, much to his annoyance. As a proof, Harry slid the bandanna off his head. Hagrid suddenly seemed more certain. "What on earth were yeh doin' in 'nockturn Alley?!"

"...would you believe me if I told you I came out of the wrong chimney?" Harry said meekly, ignoring the whisperings from people around him. "And besides, what were *you* doing trying to get in?"

"Had teh get flesh eatin' slug r'pellent. Bloody things jus' keep on comin'... well, it can wait. Yeh came with sum'one I hope?"

"Well, I was with the Weasleys, but I kind of got lost on the floo network."

Hagrid snorted and nodded. "Nasty thin', that... stopped usin' it after I got stuck in the leaky cauldron's fireplace back wh'n I was a kid though..." Hagrid said, a nostalgic look in his eyes. "Well, I'll get yeh back teh them. C'mon."

And, protected by Hagrid, Harry Potter walked through the still a bit scared crowd that had amassed in front of the exit to Knockturn Alley. Harry blinked. He had just changed his voice a bit, how come everyone was so scared?

"Erm... Hagrid, how come they're all so scared?"

"Had teh be tha' spell yeh used, make yeh sound like a d'mon."

"Erm... demons don't exist, right?"

"Sure they do," Hagrid declared, as if Harry had claimed the sky wasn't blue. "jus' not many people talk 'bout 'em since the McKindley 'ncident..."

"McKindley incident? What was that?"

"Err..." Hagrid stammered, looking around. "Oh, we're 'ere."

Frowning a bit at their inconveniently timed arrival, Harry didn't have time to repeat his question that he was roughly picked up and squeezed agonizingly, the grasp trying to choke him being commonly known as a hug.

"Harry! Thank god! I was so worried!" Mrs Weasley gasped. "Oh, Hagrid, where did you find him?"

"e came righ' out'a 'nockturn Alley. Tricked the lot of 'em shady people into thinkin' he was sum' demon 'n disguise."

"Good one!" Fred – or George – said. "We always wanted to go over there, but mom wouldn't let us."

"Well, she bloody well *should* not!" Mrs Zabini huffed. "It *has* to be the dodgiest place in all of Britain. The number if illegal deals I've seen there... ugh. If I was still an auror, I'd..."

"Wreck the place? Arrest everyone? Turn everyone there into frogs?" Blaise suggested.

"...good resume, Blaise." Mrs Zabini agreed, patting her daughter's head, much to the girl's annoyance. "But you removed lots of things."

Hagrid soon left, claiming that "Those darn slugs won' repel th'mselves". The rather large group went straight to Gringotts to get their money from the goblin's hands. Upon seeing the group, said goblins nearly panicked. A single cart was not nearly enough, and the others were already being used. It was decided that Harry, Mr Weasley and Mrs Zabini would go, Mrs Weasley staying behind to keep watch on her sons – and especially the twins.

The Weasley's vault was a pitiful thing. Harry could have almost counted the number of sickles with his fingers, and the only Gallion they had disappeared in the small leather pouch the nearly bald, red-haired man carried, along with most of the coins there. Harry felt a pang of pity and sympathy at them, and couldn't help but thank his parents for leaving so much behind.

His own trip to his vault was a quick thing. In, take, out. The pile had actually seemed to grow, since the last year.

'That much money must get one heck of an interest rate...' he thought, remembering the bank projects Dudley had done when he was little. 'course, his account didn't last long, since every penny sent there was automatically invested in the local candy store.

As for Mrs Zabini, their mediumly-full vault seemed to make the woman droll. A large, hungry smile appeared on her face as her hands nearly ripped her purse open.

"35 Gallions maximum." The goblin noted.

And Mrs Zabini's smile deflated. One by one, the woman picked them up, filling the purse with exactly the maximum of golden coins she could, all the while grumbling about 'paranoid husbands'.

"It's our family vault and mom has a bit of a spending problem..."
Blaise had said, a year ago. Harry believed her now.

After getting some gallions, Mrs Weasley left with Ginny to get her robes and wand while the others shopped for the rest of their things. A quick visit at the apothecary later, the group stood before the towering form of Flourish & Blotts, the library. Large panels, on which the blond-haired, blue eyed, 100-watts smiled, grinning face of Lockhart was winking at the crowd massed up in front of the store, were announcing, in golden, shimmering letters,

TODAY, from 12:30 to 16:30,

GILDEROY LOCKHART

Will autograph his autobiography

MAGICAL ME

'Why do I get the feeling he *likes* to talk about himself?' Harry mentally asked himself, looking at the three inch thick books displayed in the windows, bearing the name 'Lockhart'.

"...How the *hell* are we supposed to get through?" Blaise huffed, glaring at the crowd. However, as the glare of a twelve years old isn't very impressive, nobody noticed.

"Simple. You push." Mrs Zabini said, before setting the example. Harry blinked as the woman moved a man twice her size, ignoring his glare. He turned toward Blaise.

"Are you *sure* she's an adult?"

"Never was." Blaise replied with a sigh, before following her mother, who was about four or five people ahead.

"Watch it!" An awfully familiar, female voice snapped, the girl glaring at Mrs Zabini's back. Harry only had to see that light brown, bushy hair to know who it was.

"Hermione!"

The girl whirled around, whipping the person previously in front of her with her hair, before grinning. "Blaise! Harry!"

"What are you doing here?" Blaise asked, looking at her. "Getting your books?"

"Erm... that and... er..." The blush on the girl's face was all Harry needed to prompt him to groan.

"Mrs Weasley, I could handle. Anyone else I could have handled easily but *HERMIONE* fancying *Lockhart*!?" Harry gasped theatrically.

The puffy-haired girl huffed in annoyance, the blush flaring to astronomic heights. Blaise chuckled.

"C'mon, let's take the express way." She said, grabbing the other girl's arm and pulling her ahead.

"B-But..." Hermione futilely and weakly protested.

The inside of the shop were even more crowded than the outside. Along with the mass of people gathered, the piles of books laying around had never been quite as big. Most of them, Harry noticed, were Lockhart's collection. Harry scowled a bit. That guy'd better be worth it.

"Please, stop pushing and get back in the line." A security officer, dressed in bright crimson robes, told Mrs Zabini, stepping in her path. "Mr Lockhart will still be here when you'll come..."

"So, who cares?! I'm not here for that!" She snapped, attracting the attention of Lockhart on her.

"My, calm down, pretty lady, I always have time to spend with fans!" Lockhart declared, grinning.

Shooting him a glare that would have frozen hell over at least twice. Blaise was on the verge of grabbing her mom's wand arm to prevent her from cursing the man – though she *had* planned to be *accidentally* late at it – with Harry right behind her, curious of seeing in what she would transform him. Maybe a bird? Try to smile now, chicken!

Unfortunately for Harry, he had forgot his bandanna was in his pocket.

"By the gods... is that Harry Potter?" Lockhart asked.

'Oh shit.' Harry cursed mentally, looking for a way out. Too late, for Lockhart had bounced forward, ignoring the dark brown haired girl who had been patiently waiting to get her books signed, now gazing up at his scar in wide mouthed surprise and admiration. Harry mentally groaned as he was pulled forward, toward the stage, under healthy applause, much to his embarrassment.

To add to it, that annoying photograph was doing a perfect impersonation of a military machine gun, spreading purple smoke all over the crowd.

'Hopefully they won't be able to see me.' Harry thought in annoyance.

"Smile, Harry!" Lockhart said, smiling widely while shaking his hand like a washing machine. .

'Die, Lockhart.' Harry mentally retorted.

"You and me, we'll make front page!"

'Oh... gods... no.' Harry deadpanned, imagining people looking at him being greeted so warmly by Lockhart.

"WILL YOU SSSSTOP SSSSAT INFFFERNAL SHHHAKING?!?" Nemesis bellowed from under his sleeve. Fortunately, he was unheard by all except Harry, since the applauses were much stronger.

Lockhart finally released his arm, which felt as heavy as lead and as lifeless as rubber. Nemesis nearly slid off, but caught himself just as his head peeked out, quickly sliding back in. Sneering a bit, Harry was about to extract his wand from his pocket with his good arm when Lockhart grabbed him by the shoulders, forcing him to face the crowd by his side, unfortunately trapping the arm just an inch away from the wooden stick.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” Lockhart declared loudly for all to hear, commanding the silence with a single wave of his hand. “This is a great occasion... the ideal moment to reveal something I have kept a secret until now... you see, when Harry Potter here walked into the store today to buy my autobiography—”

“Get real.” Harry grumbled, but was unheard.

“, which I will gladly give to him for free,”

Harry had his breath knocked out of him as Lockhart pushed the enormous book into his chest; It was nearly as heavy as a Budger!

“he had no idea that he would soon have much more than my book, *magical me!*”

‘Oh, you mean you’ll give me your head so Flint can use it for Beater practice?’ Harry thought dryly, giving Lockhart a hateful glare.

“Yes, soon, he and his classmates will have the pleasure of having the one, true magician in person before them!”

‘...Is he using sarcasm?’ Harry wondered wryly, while he perfectly knew the man wasn’t.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, it’s my joy, my pleasure, my honor, to announce you that, coming September first...”

‘Oh... gods... no...’ Harry deadpanned again, fearfully. He could see where this was coming.

“...I will be his defense against the dark arts teacher this year only at Hogwarts, school of witchcraft and wizardry!”

Harry groaned out loud, but was ignored as the cheers rose to deafening levels. Sapping all the glory like a sponge, Lockhart flashed another smile at the crowd, waving.

'...that... self-obsessed imbecile... will be our DADA teacher?' Harry thought, a second before a large pile of books landed in his arms.

"Here, all my collection, free, just for you, Harry." Flashing a final smile at the boy, Lockhart pushed him back in the crowd, directly in the mass of assembled Weasleys.

Grumbling, Harry gave a hard stare at the books in his hands.

Rule #37: If fortune has presented you with an unexpected opportunity which you don't really deserve, the last thing you should do is correct the mistake.

Harry Potter's personal rule #1: Lockhart is an idiot.

Harry Potter's personal rule #2: Never accept gifts from idiots, it makes you look like one.

With a disgusted sigh, Harry dumped the load of books on the now ecstatic girl, who had been waiting to get an autograph. The dark brown-haired girl looked on the verge of fainting.

"Keep 'em," He said. "I'll get my own."

The girl gave him a wide smile, ignoring his sigh of disgust. He *hated* attention. He *despised* being publicly recognized and he execrated spotlight-huggers like Lockhart, who live off their fame for doing nothing but writing a few books.

(A/N: Apologies to all good professional writers out there, like JK. You guys keep writing.)

"I hope you don't make it to the first page, Potter." A familiar voice drawled. "It's bad for the reputation of Slytherins everywhere."

Draco Malfoy had arrived, his back on a nearby bookcase at their right, arms crossed and an arrogant smirk on his face. Some distance

behind him, Harry could see Mr Malfoy arguing with the cashier, all the while keeping an eye on his son.

"It's not like I asked to get noticed by that buffoon, Malfoy." Harry hissed. "Besides, what are *you* doing here? Waiting to get your book autographed?"

Draco shot Harry a hateful look that clearly meant 'ouch', to which Harry replied with a glare that meant 'sorry'.

"What's up with you two?" Ron asked. "I thought you were—"

Harry stepped on his foot and nodded, ignoring his pained curse. "Maybe he's a housemate, but he's no friend of mine."

"Same to you, Potter." Draco replied with a glare and a grateful smile. "I'd rather face a three-headed dog than be a friend to you."

"Glad we agree on something." Harry replied dryly. "Heard your dad's been selling dark arts things... Is your family having money problems?"

"Certainly not, we're rolling on gold, unlike a certain *someone* I could point out." Draco drawled, giving a look at Ron, who clenched his fist and was about to retort when his other foot suddenly found itself attempting to keep it's height under the added weight of Harry's.

"The Weasley's house isn't so bad. It's... welcoming. More than I can say for your lot though."

"Believe what you want, I *still* say it's a dump infested by Gryffindors."

"Why you little..." Ron growled, taking out his wand, but Ginny held him back.

"Not here, Ron!" She hissed.

Draco looked down at her, smirking slightly. "Oh, look, fresh meat." With a small snort, he added "Red hair, more freckles than money, and hopelessly Gryffindor. You're just *another* Weasley."

“What’s going on, here?” Arthur Weasley asked, walking up to them as Ginny colored bright red in anger.

“Oh, noth—” “My son was simply... *greeting* his classmates. I don’t think that’s a problem, is it, Arthur?” Lucius Malfoy asked, his voice dripping with aversion directed at the other man.

“Lucius.” Mr Weasley simply said as greeting, nodding coldly.

“They say there’s lots of work at the ministry, with all those searches... I hope you’re at least getting paid overtime for it...”

Digging into Ginny’s small pile of books, stored in the cauldron she was holding under one arm, he extracted an old, evidently second or third hand and hand re-sewed exemplary of *A Beginner’s Guide to Transfiguration*.

“Apparently not.” He noted, shuffling quickly through the faded pages, before looking upwards toward Mr Weasley with something in his eyes that Harry recognized as taunting, artificial pity. “What good does it do to shame the name of wizard if you don’t even get paid properly for it?”

“I don’t think we have the same vision of what a wizard should be.” Mr Weasley said.

“It would appear so.” He said, giving a disgusted look at Blaise and Hermione.

“Oh, and I suppose *YOUR* view of proper is the best one, Malfoy?” Mrs Zabini’s voice asked from behind the blonde man. Her shifted hips revealed a wooden wand-holder tied to her belt.

“Zabini.” Malfoy hissed in anger.

“What’s wrong, Lucie? Don’t want to reveal what *your* view of wizard is?” She taunted in a sing-song voice. “Mr ‘I-kissed-the-ground-Voldemort-walked-on’?”

“You have no proof.” Malfoy said with a sneer. “And besides, how’s *that* any worse from the company **you** kept?”

“Don’t you *dare...*” she hissed.

“Oh, you mean they don’t know the story of the *Crimson butcher?*”

Mrs Zabini’s face contorted in fury. Harry didn’t even see her move, but she already had her wand out, roared an incantation that Harry wasn’t able to understand and shot a bright yellow curse directly at Malfoy’s face, which he barely dodged. Instead, it flew off and impacted against the far wall, causing the sun to flood the shop.

“Temper, temper, miss ex-auror...” He taunted again, before turning to Ginny and pushing the book back at her. “Here, that’s as good as your parents will ever be able to give you. Come, Draco. We’ve wasted enough time with these... commoners.”

And the two Malfoys left, Draco shooting an apologetic glance at them before following his father through the crowd.

Mrs Zabini launched herself in a rather colorful tirade about Mr Malfoy’s lineage and after-work activities that made everyone who heard it blush. Mr Zabini quickly stopped her by remembering her there were *kids* present. Blushing slightly, she ignored the awed “Whoa”s the Weasley twins gasped out.

“Excellent description!” The twin at Harry’s left declared.

“Yes, especially when she called him a ----” The other twin at his left began, but his mouth suddenly found a hand in front of it, curtsey of a blushing Mrs Weasley.

“Or a ----” and the other found himself in the same predicament, under everyone’s laughs.

While the group was searching for an elusive exemplary of *the Standard Book of Spells, grade 4*, Harry spotted something that attracted his attention.

“Diaries” said a single sign, hanging over a collection of variously colored, sized or shaped – literally, one of them was shaped like triangle, which opened in a full hexagon.

In one of the few thoughtless moves of his life, Harry picked one of them, fortunately colored green and, thankfully, shaped like a regular book, and slipped it in his pile.

After getting their books, the group left for the leaky cauldron. The crowd had massed up against the shop, wondering what the commotion was all about. Lockhart looked very delighted of this.

On the other hand, Mrs Weasley was positively horrified.

“But... Elmira, he’s dangerous...”

“Molly, I *know* just how dangerous he is.” Mrs Zabini said. “It doesn’t make me afraid any, since he can’t do a thing as long as his target-for-ass-kissing is gone.”

“How did you meet him anyway, Mrs Zabini?” Harry asked.

“Fought him and some of his friends in the streets in downtown London. It wasn’t pretty. Kept using muggles as shields, the bastard.” She snapped. “Oh, sure, we arrested him, but he claimed imperio and paid Fudge’s opinion. Result, he’s not rotting in Azkaban.”

“You arrested Lucius Malfoy?” Blaise gasped.

“Well, technically, it wasn’t me. We were a group. But yes, I did help out. He’s not too happy, it’s the darkest stain in his records.” She allowed herself a grim smile. “The only good point is that that’s when I met Dario.”

“What did he mean with that, calling you the Crimson Butcher?” Harry asked.

Mrs Zabini’s eyes clouded over. Her fist clenched, she turned toward Harry and shook her head.

“Some things are better left unsaid, Harry.”

And with that, the conversations ended.

Pretty soon, it was time to leave. The Weasleys were going back by Floo, while the Zabinis, and Harry, would be taking the car back to Privet Drive, much to the black-haired boy’s relief. The last thing he wanted was to end up in the wrong chimney again.

‘If I can help it, I’ll never use Floo Powder again.’ He vowed mentally.

The ride back was pretty much eventless. Harry, not wanting to be nosy toward the nicest people he knew, didn’t press the questions further. Blaise kept humming the first tune they had heard on the way, a fast, upbeat song he hadn’t caught the name of. Mr Zabini was driving, and he was driving rather loudly. Not like uncle Vernon, who yelled at people on the street, but using the radio speakers to make just as much noise.

“You didn’t tell ssssem about the Malffoy ssselling dark ssstuff at Knockturn Alley...” Nemesis whispered, only loud enough to be heard by Harry over the radio.

“As much as I dislike Mr Malfoy, Draco’s my friend. And if Mr Weasley or anyone knew, he could get into trouble for this.” Harry replied, just low enough to be heard only by Nemesis.

“...I sssee. How loyal ovv you.”

“Shut up, you.”

“Yesss, Massster.” The snake’s voice dripped in sarcasm. Harry sighed and looked out the window, where pastures made way to small woods and more pastures, along the way to Little Whinging.

‘Why me?’

We'll have to watch out for airplanes, now."

Harry Potter, Harry Potter et la Chambre des Secrets, page 81

Chapter 4: Rolling

"C'MON! WAKE UP!! RISE AND SHINE!!"

Normally, those words, coming from number six, privet drive, were loud, active and woke up *not* just their target, but the rest of the neighborhood as well. However, normally, those words were usually voiced by a high-pitched, female voice, not by the young boy's tone.

...and, normally, they didn't come with a shrill scream of:

“QUIT IT HARRY!!”

Or another of:

“Wake up! It’s *Hogwarts time!!*”

“You *had* to remind me!”

Today was September 1. The day Harry Potter had been eagerly awaiting, and Blaise Zabini had feared like the plague. The day they would ride the Hogwarts express and get back in Hogwarts for another nine months of homework, learning, magic and crazy teachers.

After getting chased out of Blaise’s room, Harry literally leaped downstairs, barging in the kitchen, where Mrs Zabini was sitting at the table, listening to an upbeat song on the wireless while absentmindedly tapping her fingers on the table at each beat. Mr Zabini was just starting to cook up breakfast, which, Harry guessed as soon as he smelled the air, was pancakes.

“Smells good!” Harry complimented, sitting down on ‘his’ seat. In the short time he had lived in the Zabini’s house, the guest room and anything else that was ‘spare’ and handed to him felt more his than anything at the house on the other side of the fence, just beyond the window over the counter.

Blaise took that time to arrive, still fuming. Taking her seat in front of Harry and making a show of not looking at him, she listened to the music on the wireless, just as it ended.

“Oh, great timing. I like that song.” She growled.

As the music ended, the waves were taken over by a young-sounding, cheerful man.

“And that was *Flick at my heart*, the new hit of Celestina Warbeck, who announced the release of her new disk, *Spellbinding*, set to December 15th, just in time for Christmas! Little warning to all Celestina fans, those disks will probably vanish like golden snitches!

I'll bet you all know what day it is, today! It's September first! Yes, it's the day Hogwarts opens its gates to its students... and, answering to the widely spread rumors, Gilderoy Lockhart, the famous expert against dark forces and author, as well as five-time winner of *witch weekly*'s annual 'most charming smile' award, declared:

"It is my pleasure to confirm the rumors... have no fear, parents! Your kids' futures are in the best of hands."

...let's hope mister Lockhart doesn't find it's arch-nemesis in correcting homework and calming screaming classes of witches and wizards in training!"

Harry snorted. "Let's hope he does."

"Actually..." Blaise said, giving him a deadly grin "...let's make *sure* he does."

"Now, now... Don't plan anything back against him. At least not in front of me." Mrs Zabini said.

"Why are you defending him, mom?" Blaise asked.

Mrs Zabini shrugged. "I said you can't plan against him in front of me, that wouldn't be very responsible of me as a mother and temporary guardian. However, you can plan as much as you want out of my earshot."

Mr Zabini shot her a disapproving look as he distributed breakfast under everyone's laughs.

Time flew by quickly and, before they knew it, Harry's trunk was packed in the family's car, Mr Zabini was carrying Blaise's things down while Mrs Zabini was scraping the girl herself from the door.

"I dun wanna go!!" She whined.

"It's just nine months of school, Blaise!" Harry chirped cheerfully.

Shooting him a dark look, she growled. “Thanks for the moral boos(*Thump*)ow! Mom, careful!”

The woman, who was holding the girl’s legs while the front was spread on the floor, shrugged sheepishly. “Sorry.”

The ride to King’s cross was also a quick thing, and relatively quiet... almost.

“Are we there yet?”

“...not this again...” Mr Zabini sighed.

They made it to King’s cross with half an hour to spare. However, since the station was quite full, mostly with muggles, but the eventual wizard could be easily spotted in the crowd if one had any sense of taste.

Trolley in hand, Harry followed Mrs Zabini toward the barrier standing between platforms 9 and 10.

Remembering what he had done last year, Harry was ready to run through when he spotted Draco walking up ahead, also pushing a trolley in front of him. His parents were nowhere to be seen.

“Hey, Draco!” He called.

As soon as he spotted them, Draco’s grey eyes lit up like lamps. A grin on his face, the platinum-haired boy walked up to stand in front of him.

“Hey Harry! ‘Lo Blaise!”

The girl gave him a grin and a wave. “Good to see mister ‘vindictive asshole’ stayed home today!”

Draco frowned slightly and shrugged. “Hey, I gotta put up a convincing act... if dad learns about you two, I’m as good as dead.”

"Talking about him, he's not here?" Harry asked, looking around.

Draco snorted and gave him an odd look. "Looks like all this time around Gryffs dulled you, Harry. If he was anywhere close by, do you *honestly* think I'd risk my skin talking to you?"

Feeling a bit sheepish, Harry gave a small shrug. "Probably not."

"No way he's anywhere close. And neither is mom. He left for the ministry sometime in the morning and she's waiting for guests at home. Quote dad: 'He's old enough to fend for himself.'. 'course, he left me with Crabbe and Goyle for protection, but they spotted Bulstrode a minute ago and I lost track of them."

"C'mon, let's get going." Blaise said. "All the good compartments are going to be taken."

Agreeing, Draco and Harry aimed toward the gates and checked to make sure no muggles would spot them. The bricks in front of them looked as solid as a regular wall, but Harry perfectly knew about the fact that they weren't. Beyond them was platform 9¾ and their ride to Hogwarts, the crimson Hogwarts Express.

"Race ya?" Draco said, turning toward him with a smirk..

"You lost already." Harry agreed.

"I don't think so!" The other boy taunted, running forward, with Harry soon following with a 'HEY!'

Blaise sighed as the two boys vanished through the gates.

"I'm starting to think I'm the most mature here." She mumbled before following her friends.

The other side was just as Harry remembered it. The first sight that welcomed him on the other side was the bright crimson paint of the train, along with the many people boarding it. Taking careful steps forward to avoid walking on one of the cats running around, Harry entered the closest boarding door, followed by Draco and Blaise.

A few minutes later, they settled in one of the empty compartments, with both Hedwig's cage and Nemesis laying on the table. The three Slytherins settled their things in the allocated place, before each launched in a story of their summer.

Blaise told hers first. As Harry had already heard it, he looked out the window, where he could see the Weasleys boarding the train, along with a familiar bushy-haired Hermione.

'Hmm... looks like she stayed with the Weasleys.' Harry mused.

"Well," Draco said after Blaise had finished her story "mine wasn't so bad. I spent most of my time in our new swimming pool, when dad wasn't forcing me to study to reach the impossible goal of developing a bigger IQ than Granger."

"I'm flattered, Malfoy." Hermione said as she, Ron and, to Harry's surprise, Ginny, entered the compartment.

"I thought you'd be." Draco replied with a shrug. "Father obviously doesn't realize I'd have to spend twenty-six hours a day studying just to go somewhere on the level of *your* grades."

Hermione blinked and gave him a look, before turning to the others. "Did any of you found it unusually cold outside?"

"No, why?" Blaise asked.

"I think hell just froze over."

"I'm not *that* bad." Draco protested with a frown, before turning to Harry. "What about *your* summer?"

"Well, I spend half of it enjoying pushing the Dursleys around..."

Some time later, Harry reached the moment where his summer turned around.

“Dobby?!” Draco gasped. “So *that’s* where he was!!”

“You didn’t know?” Harry asked.

“No, I didn’t.” Draco said with a frown. “All I knew is that my laundry wasn’t done one morning. I found him later when he was closing the oven on his ears, but I figured he was punishing himself for forgetting it.”

“It wouldn’t have been much harder for you to do it yourself.” Hermione said, frowning.

“Yes it would have.” Draco replied flatly.

“What happened afterwards?” Blaise asked. “I know you got to the burrow, but...”

“They starved me.” Harry replied.

“WHAT?!” Was the general chorus.

“They locked me up in my room and didn’t give me a bit to eat.”

“Why didn’t you try to escape using magic?” Draco asked.

“I didn’t want to take the chance of getting expelled.”

“You *do* know underage witches and wizards are allowed to use magic if they are in danger, right?” Hermione asked.

“...I do now. I didn’t back then.”

“You *definitely* need to check up on what you *can* do, Harry.” Draco sighed. “What happened afterwards?”

“Ron here went straight to my place in a flying car with the twins and got me out of there.” Harry replied.

Hermione smiled at Ron. "I never knew you'd risk so much for Harry..."

"W-Well, he wasn't replying our letters. I just wanted to know if he was all right. That's all. Anyone would have done that." The boy was blushing slightly, edging away from Hermione's gaze.

"What happened then?" Draco asked, interrupting the two Gryffindors.

"I wasn't feeling too good for the next week or so, Ginny here took care of me." Harry replied, giving a look at the red-haired girl, who blushed bright red and looked at the ground.

"Oh yeah! The Weaslette." Draco said with a smirk.

Ginny gave him an angry glare. "Shut up, Malfoy."

"Oh, spunky." Draco noted with a smirk. "A shame she'll be lost in Gryffindor. They'll have her mellowed out into a giggly pile of girl fluff in the first ten seconds."

To which Hermione replied by giving him a sharp slap behind the head.

"Shut up! We're not *all* like Pavarti and Lavender."

"Naa, just two-thirds of the Gryffindor girls." Harry noted, before turning to Ginny. "Don't base your opinion of Draco on what he says. He sounds like an asshole, be he acts nice."

"Geez, thanks, Potter."

"It was my pleasure, Malfoy." Harry replied with a smirk.

"Wait a second... Aren't you all Slytherins?" Ginny asked.

"Was, am and proud to be." Blaise declared theatrically. Harry shot her a glare and mouthed "Copyrights."

"But... aren't you muggle-born?" Ginny asked Hermione. "Aren't you afraid of being near them?"

"Naa. They're the hamsters of Slytherin." The girl replied, causing gasps of mock-outrage from the green and silver audience.

"But... I thought all Slytherins hated muggles and muggle-borns..."

"That's a prejudice." Blaise said. "So, there's a few of us who don't like muggle blood. Same thing goes for every house. But to them, they're abnormal, while to us, they're considered typical. Not everyone of us is like you-know-who."

"It's like the prejudice that all Gryffindors are heroes or great." Draco drawled. "I honestly can't find anything heroic about Longbottom."

"Maybe if we get attacked by evil alien cauldrons," Harry snickered. "he'll make them all melt."

Time passed quickly. Before they knew it, it was dark outside. Hermione had switched books twice, Ginny had long since dozed off on her brother's shoulder while he was savagely destroying – and getting destroyed by – Draco's chess pieces, with Harry looking and giving 'helpful' tips to both players that would give them more pain than gain. The two had long since began to ignore him. In the meantime, Blaise was munching on Bertie bott's beans, mostly the red ones, in search for strawberries, without much luck so far – "Ugh, blood.".

"Shouldn't be much longer." Hermione noted. "We'll need to put on our robes."

"Go right ahead." Draco said, giving her a smirk. Hermione gave him another slap behind the head.

"Pervert." She growled, before getting up and waking Ginny up with a gentle prod. "C'mon, let's put our robes on."

The girl nodded and followed Hermione and Blaise, letting the three boys alone. Harry pulled his robe out of his trunk, turning toward Draco and Ron.

"You two better dress up before we make it there." He said, removing his shirt. He was *not* about to walk out wearing clothes underneath his robe this time around.

"Yeah, yeah, just gotta –Bishop to C-4, check– kill this guy." Draco said.

"In your dreams, Malfoy. Knight to C-4."

With a sigh, Harry slipped the robe over his head, then sat back down on his seat. Two minutes later, the match ended in a draw when only one of Ron's pawns were left. Both boys then proceeded to follow Harry's lead, removing their shirts...

...and were in the process of removing their pants when the three girls walked back in.

"So, did you two finished play...p-pl-...p..." Hermione began, but stopped into an incoherent stutter as her cheeks took a bright red shade.

Ginny let out a squeak and ran out, blushing to her ears.

Ron blushed just as much and retied his belt a bit too tightly.

Blaise simply *stared*.

Harry and Nemesis both burst out laughing, the snake rolling around on the table in hilarity.

Draco blinked and stopped sliding his pants down, but didn't do anything to cover himself up.

"Well, well." He drawled. "You two little minxes just waited until we were nearly naked to come in here, didn't you"

"Maybe." Blaise absentmindedly sighed, still staring.

"N-NO!" Hermione gasped, blushing bright red and looking away. "Could you put some clothes on?!"

Another squeak came from outside the hallway. Harry burst out laughing at the mental picture of a Ginny with hair paling compared to her face.

"That's what I was about to do before you barged in here. So if you don't mind..." Draco said, before sliding his pants completely off, causing Hermione to squeak and run out, pulling a reluctant Blaise with her, slamming the door on the way out. Harry lost it and fell off his chair, his laughs causing a far away dog to bark out.

"Have you no shame?!" Ron gasped at Draco.

"Shame? What's that?" The other boy quipped, sliding the robe over his head. Harry lost it again and was sent in hysterics.

Blaise had yet to say a word while Ginny and Hermione were still blushing every time they turned toward Ron and Draco by the time the train pulled into the station and stopped. Still chuckling at his friends, Harry picked up Nemesis, making sure he was well concealed in his sleeve before turning to the other occupants of the compartment.

"C'mon, peeked and peekers, let's go before the train leave again."

"Oh, sure. You're no the one who got peeked on." Ron grumbled, sweating slightly from the heat. Not wanting to risk being caught nearly pantless twice, he had simply slid his robes over his clothes.

Draco let out a cough that sounded too awfully like "Sissy" to be accidental. The red-head gave him a sharp glare, which was replied by an equally sharp smirk.

The sky outside was black. Pure black. The clouds prevented the dim light of the stars and moon from reaching them, and the low amount of artificial light caused them to be dark themselves. The result? If it hadn't been for the many lamps lit up on the platform, they wouldn't have been able to see few inches in front of their noses.

“*Lumos.*” Harry muttered, illuminating his wand. He was imitated by many students around him, some of which even slapped themselves for not thinking that sooner.

“Firs’ years! Firs’ years! Over here!” Hagrid’s voice boomed.

Harry turned toward Ginny and nodded. “He means you.”

“I know that.” She replied, before giving the huge man another look. “He’s scary...”

“Naa, he’s harmless.” Harry assured. “He’s even fun to be around, when he doesn’t have a dragon or a three-headed dog with him.”

Ginny gave him a blank stare, before Ron pushed her away, toward Hagrid.

With one less person, the group headed toward the horseless carriages. Unfortunately, as there were only four seats in each carriage, Draco had to take another ride, with Crabbe, Goyle and Bulstrode. He was *not* delighted.

The carriage set in motion, with Blaise looking out the window gloomily while Hermione was still digging in another ‘Lockhart’ book. Ron, for lack of better things to do, hummed a tune, tapping the table with his fingers with the beat.

Harry gave a look at Blaise and grinned.

“We’re back.”

The girl, for all answer, groaned gave the table a vigorous smack with her forehead, her chestnut-brown eyes giving a rough glare at the black-haired boy, who snickered.

“Cheer up! It’s only *nine months* to go!”

“You sure sound cheerful about it.” Ron deadpanned.

"What can I say, this place is like my second home, apart from Blaise's house."

"When people aren't trying to kill you." Blaise deadpanned.

"Hey, it only happened once. What are the odds of that happening ag—" He was interrupted when the carriage gave a violent shudder. A sinister cracking came to them as the carriage tilted, causing Harry to be sent flying against the wooden door, which caved out, to Harry's surprise.

'What the... they're not supposed to be this weak!' He thought as he landed in a rough heap on the dirt path.

"Harry! Look out!!" Blaise screamed from onboard the carriage, which had stopped rolling, missing the right back wheel, which was laying on the floor in front of the boy.

Seeing her alarmed gaze set on something behind him, he turned around, only to be faced with the wooden wheel of another incoming carriage; it was about to roll over him!!

Using Quidditch-honed reflexes, Harry managed to roll out of the way, with only the hem of his robe getting caught in the wheel, which rolled harmlessly away from him. After it was by, Harry got back up and dusted himself, under the stares of the passengers of passing carriages.

"Pretty good, I'd say." Blaise replied.

"Why me?" Harry asked the air, expecting an answer some time in the next minute.

"Are you all okay?" Came Hooch's worried voice as she flew over them, mounted on a Cleansweep 6.

"Yeah, sure, almost got rolled on 'cause *my* carriage just *happens* to have a wheel that cracks, now I'm all dirty and my glasses feel weird. Never better." He said sarcastically, before repeating "Why me?"

Fetching a ride on school brooms, the four students followed Hooch in the school, where Madam Pomfrey was waiting for them. After getting inspected and diagnosed as perfectly fine, they were led to the great hall, where a crowd of first years was already waiting to get sorted. Then, Flitwick brought the hat in while the four new arrivals took their places at their respective tables, Harry and Blaise finding Draco, Crabbe, Goyle and Millicent near the end of the table.

The rip in the front of the hat opened like some kind of mouth as it threw itself in a song:

"It must have been a good thousand years

Four warlocks with great imagination

And probably a good dose of medication

Decided: "We'll build our school right here!"

Their names are still widely renowned

Since they did the smart decision

To leave their names and missions

And make sure their fame survives up to now

You may wonder what in the world am I

And what happened to me

To make me look so grubby

I'll answer your question here before your eyes

I am the sorting hat

No fancy names, just that

The name says my purpose, my mission

Which is not to entertain you with here intermission.

Put me on your head, let me take a peek

At the self-identity you secretly seek

You got four choices:

Just listen to this voice

Gryffindor is for the brave

Ravenclaw is for the strong of brains

Hufflepuff are very hard working

And none are sneakier than Slytherin

Now, come up here, put me on

Don't worry, it won't take long

For me to decide where you best fit in!"

Applauses came from everywhere at once as the sound ended and the hat gave the cappish equivalent of a bow.

Professor McGonagall stepped up, holding a list of names.

"When I say your name, come here, sit on the stool and put the hat on. Then, go to your assigned table." Clearing her throat, she began.

"Atkinson, Calvin!"

A boy shyly walked up to the hat, nervously putting it on. Soon after, the word “RAVENCLAW!” Shot out, causing said table to burst into applause, guiding the grinning boy into their midst.

“Chang, Xu!”

“It plonounced *Shou*, not *that* tough, *Zhouma...*” An Asian girl grumbled, her accent rather thick, as she stepped up to the sorting hat.

“Chang?” Harry asked, remembering the Ravenclaw seeker. “Think she’s got any family with Cho Chang?”

Draco shrugged. “Maybe, but she sounds a bit too foreign for that. Chang doesn’t have an accent.”

“And she speaks in full English.” Blaise noted wryly. .

“SLYTHERIN!”

The sorting continued otherwise uninterrupted. “Creevey, Colin” was sent in Hufflepuff after giving Harry an awed look. He didn’t look all that happy.

“McKinnon, Emma” became the next Slytherin and was welcomed quite warmly.

“McKinnon?” Harry thought out loud. “Sounds familiar...”

“She’s from one of the families that were nearly ended by you-know-who.” Draco explained. “Probably the last one.”

Rather impatiently, the group waited as “Owen, Adam” “Gryffindor!” made way to “Riley, Felicity” “Hufflepuff” until finally...

“Weasley, Virginia!”

“Virginia?” Harry repeated disbelievingly.

“I knew Ginny was a weird name,” Blaise said. “it’s probably just a nickname, like Ron’s.”

“Still... *Virginia*?”

“It’s better than what *your* full name might be, *Harold*.”

That shut Harry up. Draco let out a sigh.

“Why do they even bother sorting her? I mean, we all know she’ll be a Gryffindor.” He grumbled. “I’m hungry.”

“Call it a tradition.” Blaise said, taking a sip of pumpkin juice.

“She *is* taking an awfully long time, though.” Harry noted.

“Hmm? That’s true,” Draco agreed, looking bored “but it won’t change the result. I tell you, she’ll be a—” “SLYTHERIN!”

Pumpkin juice sprayed out of Blaise’s mouth, all over the table. Very few applauses came. Harry’s head whipped toward the girl, who was still on the stool, eyes wide open in horror, her mouth gaping. Slowly, she remove the hat and gave it a look, before turning to McGonagall. Their voices were too low to be understood, but ended when McGonagall shook her head and guided her to Slytherin house.

“*Mobilisedes*” Harry cast, pulling a chair out from under a third year, causing him to fall on the floor in a heap. He moved the chair in between himself and Blaise and motioned Ginny over. Slowly, her eyes still horrified, she crashed down on the chair.

“Are you all right?” Harry asked.

Ginny slowly shook her head, giving a look at the Gryffindor table. With a dry sob, she burst out crying while Blaise hugged her tightly. Harry gave a look at the crimson table, finding Ron easily. He was standing up and staring at his sister, mouth gaping in angry horror, while Hermione was evidently trying to calm him down.

'Oh hell, what a way to start the year.' Harry thought dryly, patting the red-head on the back.

[...] you already have a slight reputation with a few people, right? Because of that story with he-who-must-not-be-named... I know, I know, it's not exactly as glorious as winning Witch weekly's most charming smile award five times in a row, but it's a start, Harry, it's a start..."

Gilderoy Lockhart, Harry Potter et la Chambre des Secrets,
page 103

Chapter 5: The Lion, The Snake and The... Idiot?

The sky was clear and orange, that morning of September 2, 1992, over the rugged, mountainous lands of the Scotland highlands. Rivers glittered brightly with the light of the dawning sun, their clear waters running downstream as they had done the day before and as they would the next.

Overlooked by a large castle, a large black lake out of which peeked few tentacles whipping at the air as the monster they belonged to played with a fish was no different, except perhaps for that small detail. Insignificant detail, of course.

Looking out of a window that was nearly at ground level, Harry Potter let out the fifteenth sigh since he had first opened his eyes, that morning. The night hadn't been any restful for him. Certainly not, after what had happened.

'A Weasley in Slytherin... I think Hermione was right, Hell *did* freeze over.' Harry thought darkly, sighing again.

The squid outside gave a careless swing of its tentacles, sending a large wave of water crashing against the shore.

Last evening, Virginia Weasley had joined the ranks of the Slytherin house. Normally, it wouldn't have been quite as bad, if it had been anyone else. But Ginny had six brothers, four of which were still at Hogwarts, living in Gryffindor tower. And they were *not* happy.

He gave another sigh.

"Would you mind stopping that?" A voice asked from the bed at his left, the curtains partly open, revealing the interesting sight of a morning Draco, coming with messed hair and sloppy, ruffled night robe that he would never reveal to anyone he didn't trust. "It's irritating."

"Sorry." He sighed.

"Look, if it bothers you *that* much, you can make sure her brothers don't become a pain in the ass – more than they are already, I mean."

"I guess. I hope Ron doesn't flip too much though..."

"Tough luck." Draco grumbled. "He may not be acting it, but I know he's not comfortable hanging around us, just because we're Slytherins."

With a final sigh – that caused Draco to grumble and slide his curtains shut – Harry left the dormitory, avoiding Crabbe and Goyle's soundproof-curtained beds.

'And thank goodness they are, too.' He thought absentmindedly as he saw the curtain rumble a bit from the sound. They *really* snored loud.

The common room was as it had always been; gloomy, a bit scary to those unused to it or if one was alone inside. However, Harry thought it was homey and comfortable, whether he be alone or in group.

And he wasn't alone.

Staring at the dying fire and sitting on the couch closest to it was a familiar, female, bright red-haired figure.

“Ginny?” Harry called. “Why are you up so early?”

The girl jumped a good foot in the air in surprise as her head whipped around so fast that, for a moment, Harry was afraid she’d die from whiplash. Her blue eyes were red and puffy, betraying her rather evident and understandable sadness.

“Harry?” She asked.

“Naa, I’m the other Slytherin kid with a scar.” The boy replied sarcastically, before catching himself. Now wasn’t the time for that.

To his relief, the girl let out a small chuckle and smiled. Taking this as a good sign, Harry sat down beside her, on the sofa.

“It’s not that bad, being in Slytherin.” Harry began, before theatrically slapping his forehead. “What am I saying, not that bad, it’s even great. Much better than any other house.”

“How can you tell?” Ginny asked.

“Shh, stop trying to ruin my moment.” He exaggeratedly shushed her, prompting another sad chuckle. “I mean, sure, the room looks gloomy and all, but it’s all an image. The others think we’re the bad guys, but just wait ‘till I bring us back the Quidditch cup.”

“You sure sound sure of yourself.”

“If I don’t trust myself, who will?” Harry retorted with a smirk. “Slytherin saying.”

She gave him an odd look. “A Slytherin saying on trust?”

“Well, actually, the other half goes ‘If no one trusts me, who will I screw over’, but it doesn’t fit now.”

This time, Ginny burst out laughing. Satisfied with his accomplished mission, Harry allowed himself a grin.

"Thanks Harry... I needed that." She said, before blushing slightly. Apparently, she had just realized who she was sitting next to. Her posture screamed of discomfort. Harry's grin faltered into a smile.

"Don't you worry. Your brothers may act pig-headed at first, but if they see you're happy here, they'll understand."

Ginny nodded slowly, a frown appearing on her face. Harry mentally slapped himself. Great, she was sad again. Smooth, Potter.

"How long do you think they'll be mad?"

"Not too long." Harry hoped out loud. "Besides, you've got help. I'm sure Hermione's going to convince Ron, and if the others get bad, we can always talk to Professor Snape or McGonagall about that."

"P-Professor Snape?" Ginny mumbled, as if only realizing now who would be her head of house.

"I'm not the best one to say good things about him, but he's fair to most Slytherins except me and Blaise. You should try to get along with him if possible."

"Easy for you to say, you don't have six brothers who went on his bad side before him."

"No, but he and my father hated each other so bad my dad saved Snape's life."

"Eh?" Ginny's disbelieving and confused look was so priceless Harry burst out laughing.

They were not alone for much longer. Sleepily crawling down the stairs from the girls' dorms, Blaise welcomed them with a cheerful, energetic "hawwooh" that had the same power potential as a battery re-used in twenty different energy-consuming machines.

Ten years.

Each.

Non stop.

Without recharges.

No question about why someone would put an old battery like *that* in anything except the trash can.

No, she was *not* awake.

As for Draco, he came down a few minutes later, hair and clothes impeccable, looking like the image of aristocracy itself, flanked by still a bit sleepy Crabbe and Goyle, who both went their own way as soon as he was with Harry and Blaise.

After a quick nod for a welcome, and a rather predatory glance at Ginny, who promptly hid behind Blaise – which was a bit hard, considering the Weasley genes were already making the eleven years old a good two inches taller than the dark-red haired girl – Draco followed his three fellow Slytherins in the great hall, where breakfast was already served and most of the students were already greedily digging in their plates, if not stretching their limbs in a superhuman morning effort of gathering the food.

Ginny sat down, dropped her books on the Slytherin table and quickly found herself flanked by Blaise and Harry on each sides, with the two other girls who were her dorm mates – whom she hadn't taken time to meet the previous night – sitting in front.

One of them was obviously Asian, with thin, black eyes, black hair and dark yellowish skin. She was also rather small, even for an eleven years old. The other was taller, with dark-brown hair and grayish eyes that looked rather familiar, at least to Harry.

“You’re Chang, right?” Blaise asked, pointing to the Asian girl, who nodded. “Any relation to the Ravenclaw seeker Cho Chang?”

“Halff-sister.” The girl replied, her Chinese accent as thick as the previous evening. The final *lf* was much too pronounced, as if she

didn't quite know how to pronounce half the words, no pun intended. "Bail-ly 'no her, she like total stranger."

'Bail-ly? Oh, barely.' Harry mentally corrected.

"Oh." Blaise said, her curiosity satisfied, before turning to the other girl. "And you are...?"

"Emma Francisca McKinnon." The other girl declared haughtily. "Sole remaining member of the McKinnon clan. You?"

"Blaise Zabini, this is Draco Malfoy—"

"Draco *Tantalus* Malfoy the second, sole heir of the Malfoy fortune and prestige." Draco corrected just as haughtily as the girl, who visibly bristled and blushed.

"And I'm Harry Potter." The black-haired boy declared as if talking about the weather.

Both girl's eyes immediately went to his forehead while their jaws impacted against the wooden table. However, as Harry had taken it to himself to *always* wear Blaise's present bandanna, they couldn't actually back up his claim.

Emma's mouth widened in surprise and Harry quickly remembered where he had seen her before.

"You're that girl I gave Lockhart's personal books to, back in Flourish & Blotts!" Harry said.

The small girl nodded, but before she could say anything else...

"Hey everyone!" Hermione called, carrying an armful of books in her arms and a smile on her face, as she unusually came up to their table, earning herself a couple of odd glances or glares, which she either ignored or returned.

"Where's Ron?" Harry asked. "I thought he'd be with you."

Her smile visibly faltered, replaced by a look of annoyance. “He’s still in the common room, with his brothers.” She gave a look at Ginny, accompanied by a small smile. “Don’t worry, I won’t let Ron do anything bad.”

Ginny slowly nodded and smiled sadly. “Thanks.”

“I think I’d better get back to Gryffindor before your housemates decide to hang me.” Hermione joked, before walking off with a friendly wave. “Catch you all later!”

Breakfast was mostly eventless, at least until the RAF (Red-head Attack Force) came down the corridor from the Gryffindor common room. None of them looked very happy. Fred and George weren’t even smiling, and that was saying something. Ginny let out a pitiful whimper.

“They hate me.” She squeaked.

Harry looked at her, a wave of anger coursing through him. She needed their help, not their rejection.

‘Idiots. I’ll help you, Ginny. I owe your family, and I intend to pay it quickly.’ Harry mentally vowed.

Trusting his knowledge on the Weasleys, Harry considered the best approach. Getting to Ron was very likely to make him flip and hit him. Fred and George weren’t smiling, which meant they were *very* mad. Perhaps his best choice was in the oldest, therefore most mature brother, Percy.

The prefect was grimly staring at his full plate, not once touching the food in it. He didn’t glance at the Slytherin table at all; if anything, he looked like he was grieving.

‘Maybe he’s ashamed of his brothers’ reactions?’ Harry mentally wondered. His resolve grew stronger; Percy was the best choice.

He didn't have to wait long. Few minutes after arriving, not saying a word, the tall prefect soon got up and left the great hall. Harry didn't waste a second and quickly followed him, giving a nod and a "See you later" to his friends.

Percy was rather easy to find. The hallways were almost empty, as everyone was either in the great hall, and the angry prefect seemed to leave a trail of empty space behind him, as everyone moved out of his way.

"Oi, Weasley!" Harry called. "Wait up!"

The sixth year whirled around to face him, hissing, "Potter. What do you want?"

Frowning a bit at the palpable hostility in the young man's voice, Harry mentally double-checked his reason for going to see *that* particular Weasley.

'Idiot, I forgot how he acted around me back in the Burrow!' He mentally chided himself, before gripping his resolve with both hands and attacking sharply at his question.

"To talk to you about your sister."

The boy gave Harry a sharp glare. It was evident, to him, that Percy was blaming him for it. And the others probably had the same opinion.

However, to his surprise, the older boy replied...

"I have no sister."

Harry's eyes widened in realization. They couldn't possibly have disowned...

A dull thud behind him interrupted his train of thoughts. He whirled around, only to face Ginny's horrified, betrayed eyes, both hands on

her mouth and her books in a heap on the floor. The two other first year girls were also gaping at the taller Weasley, while, behind the three first years, Draco and Blaise were visible.

...and the dark-red haired girl looked livid.

And that anger only grew when Ginny let out a cracking sob and ran away, down the closest flight of stairs.

"Why you asshole!!" Blaise screeched, whipping out her wand from her sleeve. "*Conjunctivi*—"

"Miss Zabini! Stop this instant!" McGonagall's voice snapped, an instant before the eye-inflammation hex burst out of the very whippy, mahogany wand.

Seeing at that situation was temporarily under control, Harry quickly ran down the stairs, where the other problem was sure to be.

'She probably didn't even notice she was running down the stairs, so she must have ran all the way down,' Harry reasoned. 'Hopefully.'

His assumption was proven correct when he found himself in the dungeons, where he could hear the girl's voice, sobbing in heart breaking wails. However, he noticed she was evidently talking to someone.

He gave a look around the next corner, where Ginny was in the comforting arms of Professor Snape, who was evidently calming her down. Or at least, trying. The girl was still letting out loud sobs that could probably be heard all the way to the sixth floor.

He noticed Snape's eyes turning in his direction, their message unreadable.

'Ginny is a Slytherin... she's his responsibility as well.' Harry reasoned.

From the way the young girl's shoulders' shaking had diminished, he could easily guess that what the teacher was doing was helping.

Harry gave his professor a small nod and a smile, which were replied grimly, before the man turned his attention toward the girl.

Climbing his way back up the stairs, satisfied that Ginny seemed to be in the right hands, Harry quickly found his friends on the ground level of the castle. Blaise and Draco were smirking a bit, while the two first years were nowhere to be found.

“Ginny’s going to be fine.” He assured, before giving them an odd look. “What happened?”

“Weasley got chewed up, that’s what. Gryffindor starts the year at minus twenty-five.” Draco drawled, his smirk widening.

Blaise grumbled something along the lines of ‘serves him right’, along with her opinion of a proper punishment for the prefect, which included a large, pointed spear inserted in an area that was generally not an entrance.

“Ouch.” The two boys chorused.

~~ Extracted from Harry Potter’s diary, dated 02/09/92

Heh, imagine my surprise when I remembered I had bought this. I guess I *do* need a diary if I forget about it.

No, honestly. I don’t even know why I even bothered to open it or start writing in it, but what the heck. I just have to make sure none of the others spot me writing this thing. Especially Lockhart.

Lockhart, the number one inspiration for birth control.

You ask why? (And I certainly hope that “you” is a me who re-reads this in many years, and not some nosy person deciding they have nothing better to do than to read the diary of little old me)

Well, here comes the answer. The tale of Harry Potter’s first day of second year. Somebody sound the trumpets, I sure won’t.

This morning went on normally, as normal as things go around here. By that, I mean that I didn't discover someone was holding a Dragon in his house/room/wherever, or a three-headed dog, or even get whacked by a rabid broom out to skin me.

...normally, those kind of things happen later in the year.

Our first class of the year was an Herbology class with the Ravenclaws. Professor Sprout decided to teach us about Mandrakes, which looked like long leaves sticking out of the dirt. The first thing she did was give us earmuffs and told us to slip them on; I only learned why after she gave us the signal and pulled the Mandrake out.

Heck, that thing was crying like a baby!

A baby with as much lungpower as Hagrid, that is. The reason was probably because it's *roots* were a baby; horribly deformed and with a bunch of leaves for hair, but still a baby.

She planted it back and removed her earmuffs, which were our signal to remove them, then proceeded to give us a lecture about their cry being fatal, but as they are small, newborn Mandrakes, it would only knock us out for a few hours.

Not a reassuring prospect, but with my luck, I'd say I end up knocked out at least once this year. And for Longbottom, that goes for two. Almost a pity I'm not in Gryffindor, I'd like to see that.

Talking about Gryffindors, Ginny's brothers are causing more trouble than I gave them credit for. I saw her again after our first class, with that Chang girl and McKinnon. She looked perfectly fine, even if a bit angry. She told me she had been offered the morning off, but refused, as it would mean giving up to her brothers. Which she refuses.

...I swear, being a Weasley comes with a stubborn streak as long as the Chudley Cannon's losing one.

What has that got to do with Lockhart? Nothing, it's just the resume of my morning. Everything was going great, at least until the first DADA class.

...I'm starting to wonder if there's some way I can ask the headmaster to either sack Lockhart or at least allow me out of that class...

[...]

~~~

Class in question which looked like it had seem better days. Hallway discussions eavesdropped beforehand had spread the rumor that Lockhart had unleashed Cornish pixies on the second year Gryffindor just fifteen minutes ago. And it showed. The entire class was covered by pictures of Gilderoy Lockhart – which didn't make it a very welcoming place, especially not after dinner – yet each one of them looked slightly shaken, their smiles evidently forced.

The fact that half the furniture of the class was broken was *also* a good hint.

"That, is me." Were the first words Lockhart told the second year Slytherins, cheerfully pointing at a picture of himself, smiling on the cover of a copy of 'Magical me' he just happened to have in his class.

'Is that one of the examples of dark creatures we'll have to beat?' Harry idly wondered, looking around the class.

Blaise looked quite bored already, Draco was looking at Lockhart like one would a six years old fruit glued to the bottom of his shoe. Crabbe and Goyle were silently chattering to each other, not caring at all about the clown in front of the class.

On the other hand, Pansy and Millicent, who were sitting at the same desk in front row, were both staring at Lockhart like he was the eighth wonder of the world. Harry almost gagged when he saw the hearts drawn on Millicent's notebook.

Blissfully ignorant of the looks he was receiving, Lockhart continued his speech.

"Gilderoy Lockhart, Order of Merlin 3rd class, Honorary Member of the Dark Force Defence League, Five-Time Winner of *Witch Weekly's*

Most Charming Smile award, but let's not talk about that. Believe me, when I got rid of the Bandon Banshee, it wasn't just by smiling at it."

If the blonde-haired, forget-me-not blue robed clown standing in front of the class was expecting laughs, his expectations were far from being reached. Apart from the dreamy sighs from the two girls in the first row, the class's stares, glares or bored expressions grew colder.

"What a joke." Blaise hissed to Harry. "I'll bet his vision of 'getting rid of it' is finding it, screaming his head off and calling the ghost busters."

Prompting Harry to snort.

Thinking he was laughing of his joke, Lockhart gave Harry a grateful look, before continuing.

"I see you've all bought the entire collection of my books. Good, very good."

Harry mentally sneered, guessing how much money the self-obsessed celebrity was making by forcing the Hogwarts students to buy his books. His sneer almost made it to his face, but only managed to reveal itself in his eyes, while the rest of his face was frozen in an expressionless mask.

"I thought we might start the year with a little pop quiz, nothing really bad, just to see if you've read and how much you remembered of my books."

A quick review of his memories assured Harry that he would fail this; he hadn't even dared *touch* the books after having received them. The mere fact that they had that idiot's face on them made him avoid the books like the plague.

However, as Lockhart distributed the questionnaires, Harry easily saw just how wrong his assumption was; it didn't have *anything* to do with DADA! In fact...

"What is Gilderoy Lockhart's favorite color?!" Blaise read out loud, quite disbelievingly. "What is Gilderoy Lockhart's secret ambition, In

your opinion, what is the greatest feat accomplished by Gilderoy Lockhart up to now... this is *trash*!!”

...it was three full pages, 54 questions, and not one of them didn't have “Gilderoy Lockhart” written in them.

‘Apparently I was right.’ Harry mused. ‘He *does* like to talk about himself. In fact, I think that's the only thing he does.’

Half an hour later, a bunch of bored Slytherins handed their copies to a still stupidly grinning Lockhart, who quickly read the students' answers.

“Hmm... Well, I expected better.” Lockhart said with a small frown, still managing to reveal some of his teeth while looking disappointed. “Mister Malfoy, maybe you should remember that my favorite color is lilac, as clearly indicated in *A Year with the Yeti*, and not candy pink. And my secret ambition certainly is *not* to scare as many people as possible with too colorful robes.”

Harry barely held back a snort, while Draco let out a satisfied smirk.

“Hmm... no, it doesn't appear anyone has a perfect grade in here...” Lockhart continued, blissfully unaware of the things said behind his back, while flipping between the pages. “I'm disappointed, really... The only one who aced my test so far was that Gryffindor girl.... Granger, I think.”

“Somehow, I'm not surprised.” Blaise noted icily.

“And... what's this? Miss Zabini? Why haven't you answered a single question?”

“Simple, I thought this was a Defense against the dark arts lesson, not a celebrity newsflash.” Blaise coldly replied. “So far, I've learned more things on how to fight the dark from McGonagall than here, and that's saying something.”

Lockhart's smile vanished completely, making him look like a completely different person. The total switch in demeanor stunned

Harry so badly he barely heard the next words Lockhart said, which were:

"Detention, Miss Zabini, and twenty points from Slytherin. That should be enough to teach you to respect your teachers."

And it was decided, at that moment, that the Slytherins would *not* like Lockhart's lesson.

*"Come... Come to me... let me rip you... let me tear you... let me kill you..."*

*The Basilisk, Harry Potter et la Chambre des Secrets, page 132*

**Thanks to: VMorticia, for betaing this chapter!**

## **Chapter 6: Chasing the dragon**

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Excerpt from Harry Potter's diary, 03/09/92

I've found something worse than Lockhart. Yup, and I still can't believe I just wrote that, but it's true. I'm starting to *really* hate being famous. I mean, if I had known that surviving getting hexed by Voldemort came with being unable *not* to be noticed in public, constant finger-pointing and even worse, groupies like Colin Creevey, I would have quit.

...Oh, right. I didn't get a choice.

I just came back from Quidditch tryouts. And boy, did stuff happen. I'll write everything down from memory, since I can still remember everything that happened.

It was a bit cold, there was some rather rough wind and it was drizzling slightly. Not the best Quidditch conditions. Flint kicked Montague off the team, simply because he missed a pass last year. So there were tryouts for Chaser this morning.

Flint is crazy; he divided the team in two, with two chasers on each sides, with some guy called Felwood as a keeper on the other side. Problem is, our two ancient Chasers were on the same team. Of course, I was all alone. I was *supposed* to look for the snitch, but after the sixth time, I got bored. Playing against no one is boring, but watching the tryouts wasn't.

I guess it shouldn't have been much of a surprise, but I was still stunned when Draco came in carrying a brand new, prototype version Nimbus 2001 on his shoulder. A bit more when he slipped it under him and started flying it expertly. I mean, I knew he was a good flyer, but it *is* a new broom. He told me afterwards that it tends to take turns too wide; not a big problem for beaters or chasers, but for keepers and Seekers, who tend to have to veer quickly to either stop a quaffle or follow the snitch, it would have been difficult.

There were others who were quite good, but Draco was by far the best. His aim is almost perfect, even if he tends to play Rambo a bit too much. When a chaser does fifteen shots for twelve passes, there's a problem.

Flint was about to let someone else on the team for that exact reason when a letter came in, from Lucius Malfoy. After that one, he let Draco on the team with a warning that "Heroism is for Gryffindors. Underhanded passes and feints are a Slytherin's method!". I was almost tempted to add using steel-reinforced beater bats on the opponent's heads, but I kept it quiet.

Odd thing, he had an odd smirk on his face, as if Christmas had come early five days in a row. More is going to come out of this, I know it.

~~~

The air was unusually cold that Friday, two days after the events of September 2. After the disastrous first Defense against the dark arts lesson and Percy Weasley's rather extreme reaction to Ginny's house placement, it was due time for some action at Hogwarts. After all,

they had enjoyed two full days of – relative – peace and quiet, which was about a record at Hogwarts.

And action began that morning, when an unfortunate owl afflicted with a bright canary yellow ribbon around it's neck flew down at the Slytherin table, depositing a letter directly in Blaise's face as she was about to take her first sip of cereals, effectively causing her to spread the milky food all over her face.

"Why you little!! I'm going to make barbecue out of you for that one!!" The girl hissed, making a grab for the owl, which sagely decided that evasive action was the best route.

Harry, sitting just beside the dark-red haired girl, decided to move her cereals away from her before she spilled the rest of it, then took the letter and checked it's content.

"Uh ho." He mumbled, feeling the girl's mood would not improve anytime soon.

*To Miss Zabini,*

*Your detention will take place in my office at 7:00.*

*Gilderoy Lockhart, Order of Merlin 3rd class, Honorary Member of the Dark Force Defense League, Modest Five-Time Winner of Witch Weekly's Most Charming Smile award*

"Gimme that." The girl sighed, making a grab for the letter, which Harry reluctantly let go.

Not a minute later, her enraged shriek came through the thick doors of the great hall.

"I had forgot *that*!!" The girl grumbled, pulling her cereals toward her...

...just as Lockhart himself, dressed in deep turquoise robes, burst through the doors with a very loud "BANG".

Causing the cereals to be pulled a bit too close. So close, in fact, that the bowl fell on the floor and that icy cold white milk suddenly stained the lap of the girl's black robes, and let's not forget effectively waking her legs up through shock treatment.

She hadn't even calmed down when the group left the great hall. The few rather displaced comments about the young girl having white stains all over her dress, while being flanked by both Harry and Draco, were met by ferocious bark from the furious inspiration for sedatives.

Only the two boys' intervention prevented those barks from becoming bites.

"Harry, note this down somewhere: I swear that by the end of the year, I will make Lockhart regret he's ever heard the name of Zabini!" The girl hissed as they neared the common room. She was *not* going to class looking like she had done something *very* inappropriate for her age.

"Ah... sure." Harry said, making a mental note to write it down, along with a dozen orders of sedatives... whale-knockers should be strong enough to at least calm her down... right?

~~~

Excerpt from Harry Potter's diary, evening of 04/09/92

I swear, Lockhart's attempting to get himself killed on purpose. There's no way anyone can be this oblivious. And still be alive, I mean. Pissing off an entire year of Slytherins is a dangerous thing – well, maybe not Pansy and Millicent, they don't hate him... yet. – but to piss off Blaise like that is even worse. The only time I've ever seen her this angry is... is... never, actually.

If I didn't hate the idiot myself, I'd start to pity Lockhart. But seeing as I despise him so much I'd gladly yank his teeth out of that annoying smile with no sedatives and a rusted pair of blacksmith tongs, I'll refrain from commenting.

Blaise is currently away, doing the detention he gave her. Knowing him, it's probably being forced to read parts of his books while he listens and showers in the praise.

I have no idea how those things managed to get on school. I'm going to... ugh... *QUOTE* one bit of '*Wandering With Werewolves*', right here. I mean, c'mon! You have to *LOOK* for the way to defeat whatever monster there is!!

It was then that I, Gilderoy Lockhart, made the brilliant connection that can only come from a mind such as mine. Our suspicious guide was none other than one of the creatures he had been 'guiding' me to!

"Back away, werewolf!" I heroically called, brandishing a silver knife. The pose was magnificent, with the sun reflecting off my long mane of golden hair, my charming smile shining beautifully as always.

"Gilderoy!" Mathilda screamed with alarm; she didn't have to fear anything. I, Gilderoy Lockhart, am an expert in such situations.

Our guide let out a growl and, to my surprise, suddenly arched his back and transformed before my very eyes! Oh, it was a terrible, terrifying sight. It looked like a failed attempt at Animalgy. Snarling with nearly five inches long fangs, standing about six feet taller than me, with powerful claws that raked the holy grounds we were standing on, it would have terrorized anyone not used to such situations.

Fortunately, I came prepared, if ever such a situation came.

Guiding it's attention away from Mathilda, I heroically charged forward, knife at the ready. Before it could lift one of it's wicked, twisted claws, I had it's throat beneath my blade.

"You shall not terrorize anymore innocent victims, you infernal, twisted fiend! I, Gilderoy Lockhart, hereby banish you back to the hell that spawned you!"

And as my knife pierced its throat, it let out a final, guttural and agonizing howl. It was dead before it fell to the ground.

"Did... did you have to kill it?" Mathilda asked me, her beautiful face twisted in sadness and regret.

*I felt ashamed of myself; such an innocent, beautiful person should never have been exposed to the horror that is a Werewolf. The sight of fear in her eyes only steeled my resolve; this land **would** be free of all those terrible monsters, even if I had to kill a thousand of them!*

And I stop right here. Let's just say that he kills all the werewolves in unbelievable and obviously fake fashions, then gets the girl, as usual. He'd be better – but not by much – at writing novels – that don't include himself, that is – not schoolbooks!! What was Dumbledore thinking, I have no idea. I'm starting to agree with the rumors. Our headmaster is barking mad.

I learned what the letter was all about yesterday. Flint reassembled the team on the Quidditch field this morning – after chasing the Gryffs out of there first. Lucius Malfoy had given us a present.

Our whole team have Nimbus 2001s now. I'm not going to use mine, though. I said I felt better flying my old broom. In all honesty, I think I'd rather dance on the Hufflepuff table butt-naked than accept a gift from *that* man.

On the other front, there's what Draco and I now call the "Weasleys Are Ridiculously Thick" situation, WART for short – don't ask, he came up with it – Percy's not the most popular guy at school right now – not that he ever was. His actions two days ago made most people mad at him; the Weasleys are well known around here and most of them are liked. From what I've seen, most people are on Ginny's side.

Weird enough, a Ravenclaw prefect called Clearwater reacted more strongly than anyone else. She slapped him at lunch time today, yelling “We’re through!”. Did Percy have a girlfriend? Well, if so, he doesn’t anymore.

I still haven’t had the chance to talk to Ron or the twins, but it’s in my priorities.

Ginny looks ok, for now. She’s getting to know her dorm mates at the moment, sitting on the couch in front of the fire. I can overhear them, but just barely. Xu Chang’s talking right now. I’ll try to write it down, but any mistakes are to be forgiven. Her accent is *thick*!!

“Six brothers, eh? I almost wish I had at least one. Only family I have is *mama*” er.. how to I write that name... Kaeeshee? Anyways. “, ‘High and mighty Englishwoman’ half-sister Cho. That and squib uncle and cousin Plum, but they live at Jusenkyo, in China. Is in middle of nowhere, Tsinghai region, just edge of Himalaya. We barely visit.”

Or something like that. She’s a bit too far for me to hear correctly. Oh, it’s almost time for Blaise’s detention to end. I think I’d better fetch her before she kills something.

~~~

It was nearly curfew. The sky outside was dark and cloudy, it was raining a bit, with autumnal mist covering the lake and most of the grounds. All and all, it looked rather eerie. Especially since the owlery owls were mostly all out hunting, and their hooting could be heard all the way to the window out of which Harry was staring.

“C’mom, she should have been out half an hour earlier...” Harry grumbled, giving a look at his watch, then at the closed door bearing a sickeningly grinning picture of Lockhart in front of him.

The only sound he could hear coming from the other side of the door was Lockhart’s voice, talking loudly, probably gloating. Every now and then, a rich, frank laugh could be heard. But never Blaise’s.

‘This must be pure hell.’ Harry noted.

He couldn't help but feel intense pity for his closest friend. He was tempted, every time he heard the evidently retarded man's laugh, to bust through the door and help Blaise out of there. However, the last thing he wanted was to be stuck in the same situation. With resign, he forced himself to grip the windowsill with both hands, attempting to calm himself with the cold air blowing through the slightly open window.

A tickling on his right hand startled him into looking down, only to see a spider run over his hand, reach the edge of the window and jump off, hanging from a thread.

Harry didn't really mind spiders; after living ten years with them, they felt more like unwanted neighbors than the disgusting eight-legged freaks some people thought about them. So, he knew it wasn't that which caused him to stare at the small non-insect.

It was the speed at which it had ran, as if in hunger for a huge meal on the other side of the finish line in front...

...or in panic from a horrible, terrifying danger behind.

He made a mental note to tell Snape later. After all, the man *had* asked him to report anything odd going on. And *that* definitely scored as odd.

The door suddenly opened, allowing a young Zabini who was literally glowing with anger to get out. Harry barely had time to see the back of the blonde author before said door slammed shut, causing the picture hanging from it to hold itself on the frame.

Harry saw she was about to launch in a tirade against Lockhart. Wisely, he motioned for her to be silent and guided her away; no need to have her get another detention. However, as soon as they were far enough, the girl exploded like a dynamite.

"That *idiot* was so busy talking about himself and bragging that he let me off an hour too late!! Now we'll be lucky if we don't get caught by Filch!"

"What did he make you do?" Harry asked in curiosity.

Curiosity killed the cat, therefore, Gryffindors should be careful.

"That good for nothing egomaniac made me reply to his fan-club!! You cannot *believe* how **DISGUSTING** most of them were!!" She raged on, before smirking. "course, that gave me the best possible way to start a proper payback..."

"Uhm?" Harry asked, before turning to the wall in front of them. "Patricius."

"Let's just say I didn't *quite* write what he would say..." Blaise said with an evil smirk as the wall moved out of the way, revealing their common room. "I mentioned he was gay, that he was impotent, a fake, among other things. Most of them were female, so I've had my fun at it."

Harry couldn't help it. Thinking of the girl's reactions at receiving letters like that caused him to burst out laughing, completely careless that he'd wake half the dungeons in the process.

He was so amused and distracted by it, in fact, that he completely forgot about spiders.

*I don't really know the rules of Quidditch... Is it true that there are four balls? And that two of them try to knock the players off their brooms?"*

*Colin Creevey, Harry Potter et la Chambre des Secrets, page 118*

## **Chapter 7: Creevey glue**

**Author's notes:** I really don't like how this chapter turned out. This is one of those I'll probably have to re-write one day. \*sighhh\* \*Kills writer's block\*

Time passed quickly at Hogwarts, for once. And Harry was grateful. The weekend whizzed by like a hummingbird on speed. Blaise's attitude went like a rollercoaster; high up, before crashing down at all speed when came Monday.

Why?

Because, that morning, their loyal timetables betrayed them with the absolute worst news ever made. Simple news that brought mixed feelings in their group. One of them being:

"WHYY!??!" Blaise theatrically queried the enchanted roof of the great hall, clenching the unfortunate piece of parchment in her fist.  
"Why POTIONS?!"

Yes. The reason for the girl's dismay is this, a single word scribbled on the parchment currently wishing it had limbs to escape the death grip it was suffering under. Double potions, first thing in the morning.

Harry was nervous. He didn't quite know what to expect; Snape *had* been an asshole the previous year, but now that he had repaid his debt, he wasn't as bad, if not downright *civil* to Harry. However, from what a short encounter in a hallway on the sixth floor had told them, he still despised Blaise.

Why?

Neither of them had any idea. Knowing Snape, however, it might have been something as petty as a dropped coin on his shoe when neither knew each other.

As for Draco, it was needless to say he was quite elated, his grin even bigger and more victorious as he chewed on a handful of Bertie bott's beans... forgetting that taking more than one at a time is a very risky thing.

At 8:50, the group decided to leave to their doom, bidding a final goodbye to Ginny and her dorm mates, who were getting ready for Defense Against the Dark Arts – disdainfully nicknamed, by most of the Slytherin house, as “Protection against Really Annoying Tarts”, or PRAT for short. Ignoring the sad remains of diversely flavored beans on the floor, one of which was claimed of being dragon vomit – let's not ask how our Dear Draco knew such a thing for our own safety – Harry led the rest of the Slytherin second years down in the Dungeons.

~~~

[Excerpt from Harry Potter's Diary, September 7, 1992]

I admit I was nervous. I mean, sure, Snape didn't have a life debt on me anymore, but come on, a whole year of being his personal verbal punching bag doesn't go away easy. Especially with someone who's got wall-breaking verbal punches like he does.

But that wasn't the only reason. As always, our Potion class was shared with the Gryffindors – I swear, that's a recipe for a potion of disaster. Meaning, Ron would be there.

As much as Blaise and I tried – not Draco, since he doesn't want anything to do with Gryffs except for Hermione (Whom, he claims, is the only one cleaver enough to be worthy of his attention) – we still haven't managed to talk to him alone. Either he runs off, or he's with the other Gryffindors, or with his brothers – which is worse.

We don't really know how he feels about the whole Ginny mess, yet. And if there's one thing I don't like, it's not knowing.

We got there just in time, but Snape didn't bat an eyebrow, only gave Blaise a tongue-lash about taking too much time counting the stones on the ground along the way and too little walking to his class. I was tempted to mention that Draco and I came at the same time, but then thought better.

Unlisted Slytherin rule: Luck is like a big, red button written "Boom" on it. Pressing it is to be considered reckless.

He then started off his class as usual; introduced the potion – a brew made to turn someone's eyes green (which would be useless to me), insulted Longbottom, wrote down the ingredients, insulted the Gryffindors in general, ordered us to get working, all the while glaring at the crimson half of the class.

By crimson, I really mean it, they were boiling red in anger, by now. I'm starting to see why Draco likes this class so much. When Snape isn't aiming them at me, his taunts are a work of art.

It was a rather easy potion, but it didn't stop Longbottom from messing up; his cauldron started boiling with rainbow-colored smoke and Snape had to turn the fire off and dump the potion in one of the taps (which kept making these odd detonations until the end of the class).

As usual, Ron and Hermione were sitting together, at the far back table. I decided to take action. It was now or never.

~~~

Harry silently picked up the parchment he had written the recipe on and delicately tore a part off. Picking his quill up, he dipped it and, making sure not to drop a drip, wrote down:

“Ron,

Meet me after class

~Harry”

Then, with as much precision as he could, he threw it directly at the tall Weasley boy, who looked quite startled to receive a ball of paper on the side of his head.

“Nice aim.” Draco whispered, giving him a thumbs up. Harry shushed him quickly.

Draco’s comment suddenly made him aware of the rest of the class – most of the Slytherins had seen him and were silently cheering him on. Millicent was even offering him a bigger piece of parchment to throw. Sitting at his desk in front of the class, Snape was giving him a disapproving glance.

Which had the firepower of a shotgun at point-blank range.

Remembering how Snape had comforted Ginny before and hoping he would understand, Harry mouthed the Weasley girl’s name to him.

With a somber nod, Professor Snape dropped the matter.

Harry gave a look at Ron, who had just finished reading the small message. To his surprise, however, the red-head took the message in both hands and tore it apart, glaring at him.

“Why do I get the feeling Ron’s not too happy with you?” Blaise asked.

Harry could only nod in response, wondering what he had done.

The bell rang and Harry had still not found an answer. Looking at Ron, he saw the tall boy throw his things into his bag and quickly stride out in front of everyone else.

He gave a look at Blaise, who returned it and nodded. "Let's go catch him."

Ron was rather easy to find. Five and a half feet tall with red hair, he wasn't exactly the most unnoticeable person in school. Catching up to him, however, proved to be more of a challenge, as his strides were quite longer than Harry and Blaise's. That and, upon finding he was being followed, he picked up the pace and burst into a run.

The crowd was, fortunately, very thin. A bunch of third years were getting ready for their class and politely scampered out of their way. More than once, Harry was thankful for the Weasley red hair; losing him was all that harder.

"Ronald Weasley, you stop right here or I'll curse you!!" Blaise snapped in anger, panting.

They finally caught up with him when, out of breath, the boy stopped and stood his ground, few halls away from Snape's classroom. Oddly enough, probably without thinking it, Ron had headed back in a nearly full circle.

"F...Fina...Finally... got you." Blaise panted, wand in hand.

"Y... You didn't have t... run..." Harry panted in turn.

"Why'dja... want ta... talk to me... so bad... anyway?" The boy said, before swallowing and catching his breath.

"About Ginny," Harry replied. "and if you feel the same way as Percy."

"...why should you care?! It's all *your* fault to begin with!" Ron replied with a sneer. "You two are the ones who corrupted her!"

"You know what? I really love how you make being in Slytherin look like some kind of sin." Blaise sighed sarcastically.

"Just... leave me alone, I don't want to talk to you... or her." Ron snapped.

Harry didn't answer as the taller boy turned around and walked away, climbing up the stairs. Blaise made a move to stop him, but Harry lifted his arm and blocked her way.

"Why are you stopping me?" Blaise hissed, her wand whipping inches from Harry's ear with a fizzy magical sound.

"There's hope yet." Harry said with a smile. "He doesn't know what to think. And he's trying to figure it out. Let's hope he doesn't take a page out of Percy's book."

"For his sake." Blaise added.

"Never thought otherwise." Harry agreed.

The next lesson was easily the toughest one they had got so far. Lockhart had been seen not too far from the greenhouses just before class started. And Sprout had been in a suspiciously lousy mood.

It seemed that Gilderoy 'Legally blonde' Lockhart's addition to the professors wasn't welcome by the teachers either.

'Just what was Dumbledore thinking?!" Harry wondered for the fifteenth million time.

Taking care of the mandrakes wasn't as bad as the previous times. They simply had to pour some water on them and make sure their leaves weren't folding. The lesson ended quickly enough, with Sprout asking them to write down an essay on possible uses of Mandrake leaves.

Harry was willing to bet Hermione could have written that essay down from memory. Unfortunately, he didn't have that much luck and was

forced to dig in the library, which he did just after supper, the same day.

*'Nasty plants for everyday use, Man-eating plants and how to care for them...'* Harry mentally read the titles of the books. 'Heh, like anyone would want to take care of a man-eating plant... except maybe Hagrid.'

Thinking about Hagrid, Harry hadn't seen the large man once since the start of the year, since that small glimpse at the Hogsmeade station. As unpopular as the giant man was among the Slytherins – who didn't like his rugged and poor appearance – Harry had to admit he missed the gigantic man.

'Back to the books, Harry! You'll talk to Hagrid later.' He scolded himself.

Hearing whispering voices in the library wasn't an uncommon occurrence, though some people tended to hear more of them than others. Usually, Harry would eavesdrop on the students to see if they were talking about anything interesting. Usually, that didn't bring up anything.

Keyword here, usually.

"...not their fault, Ron!"

"Right, 'mione. Right. And which Slytherins came and fed all kinds of stories to Ginny? *Those two*. Who was she with during the train ride? *Those two*—"

"*All of us*, Ron. She was with all of us. Remember?"

"Yeah, well, she was closer to those *Slytherins*. And Malfoy."

"Draco was sitting beside *me*, Ronald Weasley! Stop being a prat!"

"*Draco*, is it?" Ron hissed angrily. "Getting friendly with the enemy, are you?"

"En—Ron, what on earth?!"

Ron didn't answer. Harry clenched his fists angrily.

"Look. Ok, so you're pig-headed about this. I don't care if you don't want to talk to Harry and Blaise anymore. You've never spoken civilly to or about Draco once in your life, so I won't ask miracles. But at least talk to Ginny." Hermione said.

Again, Ron didn't answer. Harry heard Hermione growl in anger.

"Ronald Weasley, you'd better go talk to Ginny or—"

"Or what?!" Ron replied angrily, forgetting all about hushing his voice. Harry heard Pince walk toward them. "I'm not going to talk to her! She's shaming our family!"

Harry heard Hermione gasp in surprise and anger, followed by a resounding slap that must have echoed everywhere in the library.

'Ouch.' The black-haired boy thought.

"I'll see you later." The girl coldly hissed, walking away at a fast pace, carrying a handful of books.

"H...Hermione?"

And Pince arrived to kick Weasley out of the library.

Few minutes later, Harry came out of the same doors, carrying a book in his hands and a lot to think about in his head.

~~~

[Excerpt from Harry Potter's Diary, September 8, 1992]

Man, I'm really using this thing up... well, guess what. Another thing happened. Flint managed to book up the quidditch pitch for our team for every Tuesday and Thursday, and the entire week end. All of these in the afternoon. Funnily enough, the Gryffindors have to get up extra-early in the morning because Wood starts practices at five. Even on weekdays. That sure makes me glad I'm not one of them!

I think he thinks that if he's making them work from the break of dawn, they'll get better. The rest of the team agrees with me; they can only get worse, overworking themselves like that.

-not that we'll help them, of course. Let's leave them to their slavedriver, while we work out after school's over, so our grades don't lower and we can practice with more attention.

Well, back to the point. We had Quidditch practice today. Draco's first. He did good, I must admit. Oh, sure, Flint chewed him up because he wasn't passing properly, but give him a break, it's his first time playing in a team.

Besides, Flint chewed everyone up. Even me.

Why me? Because I wasn't using the Nimbus 2001s. I told Flint I had tried them out, but they didn't have good enough cornering – which is true, thank Draco for giving me the idea – but the real reason is that I'm not a beggar, at least not enough to use Mr Malfoy's brooms.

I don't like him. Not one bit. And I get the feeling Draco doesn't either, outside of the pride that having a high-ranking, powerful father gives him. And the Malfoy fortune.

Well, back to what happened. Everything was going as usual. I had just released the snitch for the second time when a saw some kind of flash...

~~~

Harry's head whipped around, his eyes searching the air between him and the empty stands.

"That's odd, I could have sworn..."

A sharp whizzing was all the warning he had, but it was all it took for Harry to quickly duck for cover just a Bludger nearly hit him in the face.

"Oi, Derrick! Watch it!" He yelled.

"Sorry, I'll aim better next time!" The boy retorted, catching up to the Bludger and sending it flying at Draco, who barely managed to veer out of its path, causing him to lose the quaffle and attract Flint's anger.

'Oh, that's right...' Harry remembered. 'The beaters aren't defending us...'

That was another one of Filch's brilliant training ideas. Since the Beaters couldn't be everywhere, Flint wanted everyone to be able to easily dodge whatever Bludger was sent at them. And so, the beaters had for mission to knock them out of the sky.

Another glint caught his attention and caused his head to whip in the same direction as before.

"...something's up..." He grumbled, flying closer.

Another flash came. This time, Harry saw it clearly.

"Bole!!" Harry called for the closest beater, who turned toward him while dribbling a Bludger with his bat, apparently choosing his next target.

"What's up?" He asked. "You want to be shot?"

'Hell no!' He thought vehemently. "We've got a spy, over there!" He said, pointing at the location of the flashes. Another one came, giving Bole a precise target.

And the Bludger was sent flying.

~~~

[Excerpt from Harry Potter's Diary, September 8, 1992]

It turned out that it wasn't really a spy. More like a groupie of mine. His name's Colin Creevey, Hufflepuff first year. A real fan of mine. Unfortunately. The guy is more annoying than a mosquito-infested

swamp in a neighbor's backyard. (If it's in yours, at least you can dry it up and get rid of it.) He acts like a talking shadow whenever he finds me and he's harder to get rid of than a roll of two-sided duct tape.

Bole gave him a black eye with the budger and nearly another one with his bat before he noticed that brat was unconscious. We brought him to the infirmary, saying that he had tried to fly on one of our specially made broom that knocked him off. Pomfrey didn't bat an eyelid – I think she's tired of trying to see through Slytherin plots.

[September 9, 1992]

I'm not feeling too well. Here's my day.

I thought it would be that last of him then, but noo. I saw him again. At the worst possible place. And first thing in the morning, too.

Who?

That talking tube of Creevey glue, what else?

~~~

Harry swallowed the bile that had massed in his throat. Lockhart's lesson had been especially disgusting today, if not for the reason that the evidently color-blind rejected drag queen had worn odd, pink and dark blue robes, then because of it's subject.

Harry would never be able to look at doxies without being traumatized. The way Lockhart had freed an infested village of those things was so...

...so...

...impossible and obviously a lie.

"At least, things can't get any worse." Harry grumbled.

"hhhyou know what hhappened to the lassst guy who sssaid sssomething like ssshat?" Nemesis asked from under his sleeve.

Draco and Blaise were arguing on which part of Lockhart's story was most unbelievable.

"What happened?"

"Harry!" A high-pitched voice came from the other end of the corridor, where the first year Hufflepuffs were coming. "There you are!"

"Ah..." Harry wittily quipped while Nemesis snickered.

"Sssomething like ssshhat." The snake replied.

Small, with short brown hair and brown eyes, Colin Creevey was *not* impressive in any case. His camera hanging from his neck, miraculously intact after meeting a Bludger – it probably got magically repaired – and his grin was huge, as if Christmas had come early seventeen times in a row.

"Uh..." Harry mumbled as the boy ran up to him, his black eye still shining. He gave a look at the mass of Slytherins behind him and growled, getting angry.

'Stupid groupie, go away!'

"What'd you want?" He coldly asked.

Completely ignoring the coldness in Harry's voice through either strong will and intense bravery or, more simply, obliviousness, Creevey smiled.

"I wanted to tell you I'm sorry I went to the Quidditch pitch... I should have known your team wouldn't want me there, I'm a Hufflepuff after all... I told the hat I'd work hard to be the perfect Slytherin and it sent me there instead... it's not that bad, but the yellow and black colors are getting to me. Green and silver look so much cooler, but don't let the other Hufflepuffs hear I said that, I might get into trouble."

Harry blinked, trying to re-organize what the small boy had told him in less than five seconds. To his great horror, though, taking a deep breath didn't slow the younger boy down. Not one bit.

‘...Let nobody give coffee to this Huffie...’ Harry mentally pleaded to the heavens.

“I know you didn’t mean to let your teammate send that metal ball at me... was it really a Bludger? Aren’t you scared they might hurt you?”

‘Noo, I’m just afraid they’ll suddenly grow scissors and cut by hair off.’

“What’s going on, here?” Lockhart asked, walking out of his classroom, still clad in that horrible two-color robe. Finding Harry ‘talking’ with Colin, who was holding on his camera, Lockhart smiled and sighed sadly.

“Oh, Harry, Harry... I should have known giving you a taste of the spotlight was a mistake...” Lockhart said, theatrically sighing, his hand cradling his forehead and temples, blocking his eyes in the process. Still, he smiled. “It’s too early for you to give interviews yet, Harry... people will think you have a big head. Oh, I could slap myself. This is all my fault...”

And when Lockhart stared at where Harry had been, he found nothing but the ground.

“Harry? Where did you go?”

The common room was unusually noisy that day. Rumors about Lockhart and Harry had spread like wildfire. No one thought anything less of Harry – they all knew he couldn’t stand Lockhart, like most of the Slytherins – though everyone shared a laugh, imagining Harry’s face.

Sitting in the sofa closest to the fire, normally only used by seventh years, and flanked by Draco and Blaise, Harry was furious.

“Stupid Lockhart.” Harry repeated for the thousandth time. “Stupid Creevey, stupid Hufflepuffs, stupid... *everything!*”

“I take it you’ve met Creevey?” Emma asked as she, Xu and Ginny walked up to them. “Ruddy bugger.”

“Damn right he is.” Harry growled.

“Count yourself lucky he’s not in your year.” Ginny said with a sigh. “He keeps asking me about you, how you’re doing, how you walk, breathe, what you eat... I swear, he has no life, except for yours.”

“Completely obsessed.” Xu agreed. “Not start bother me yet, though.”

“Bothering.” Emma corrected.

Xu gave an annoyed growl and muttered something indecipherable in Mandarin. Harry chuckled.

“You’re getting better.” Ginny assured, patting her friend’s back. “You’ll get the hang of it in no time.”

“I ‘no I should have took lessons befole leavinn.” The asian girl sighed, before turning to Ginny, puzzled. “Hang? How can get hanged language?”

“It’s a figure of speech...” The red-head sighed.

“So, what did Creevey do?” Emma asked Harry. “Heard some rumors about it, but I’d rather hear from your mouth.”

“He made Lockhart think Harry was having an interview in the middle of the hallway.” Blaise replied for an embarrassed and beat red Harry.

“I wonder which one stupidest, sometimes...” Xu mused.

Lockhart.” Draco replied flatly. “At least Colin doesn’t write“  
”.’schoolbooks‘

first Yet.” Blaise declared ominously. “But I can see it now... his very“  
”.*Hogwarts with Harry*:book

.Ugh, Blaise...” Harry groaned“

”.*Prancing with Potter*:And then, it’s“

.BLAISE!!” Both other Slytherins glared at the girl“

”!!umphh—*Best friend with the Boy-who Followed by“*

Mouth blocked by Draco, Blaise was unable to finish the third  
.hypothetical best seller of Gilderoy Creevey

”.Blaise, do yourself a favor.” Draco said. “Don’t do that again“

“Not just yourself.” Harry muttered, feeling sick at the thought of the books. “But for us all.”

## INTRODUCTION:

The readers find themselves, once again, in a small, dimly lit, poor bar. Rich metal chairs surrounded cardboard boxes that served as tables – the previous, dangerously damaged wooden tables having all either been sold or sawed off and used to repair the damages done on the building by the angry mob, two weeks ago. Even though their target had been Akuma-sama, a fight involving a dozen authors capable of typing up potential weapons of mass-destruction was *not* safe for public property.

The barman, who had just yesterday removed the cast on his arm protecting the wrist sprain received when his attempt of pulling the maimed author out of the mob had been foiled when *Simply Myself* had typed up a positron cannon – Elizabethan style, of course – and fired, taking out half the bar in the process, was now in the process of sighing, taking a rope and throwing one end down a hole in the floor, where a grateful reader attempted to pull himself out of, unfortunately forgetting that the other end was not tied to anything.

Those few who had managed to avoid falling in the gaping abyss that was underneath the bar eagerly awaited for the show to begin – and attempted, as much as they could, to ignore the despaired and pained wailing that came from the previous reader.

Finally, the lights dimmer further – to the despair of those already in the darkness – and, the two thick curtains moved, agonizingly slowly, inch-by-inch, millimeter-by-millimeter... before the bar holding them up snapped and the green drape spectacularly fell down all over the stage.

Loud French cursing ensued as a furious author attempted to remove it, before sighing and typing the curtains out of existence.

Akuma-sama in all his... maimed and mangled glory stood on the stage, as well as one can stand on a wheelchair. The FISHER PRICE VOICE THINGY(TM) rolled at his side, also in a wheelchair. Giving an eye over the crowd, he cleared his throat and spoke.

“Umm... I decided to upload this one as soon as I finished it, as I judge you’ve all waited long enough.”

"Judge?!" An angry reviewer asked, glaring. "M'a t'en faire, moé, du jugeage!!"

Akuma-sama deflated and, quickly, turned the fic on.

"What was that intro for?" A girl holding, in her hand, a mob-be-gone spray (just in case) asked.

"Umm... well, just that I'm going to write up two chapters before I update the next one..." The self-declared demon lord hesitatingly said.

A new mob formed. *Flumox* sighed. She had had a good idea, when she had packed her spray.

### **The Snake-who-lived**

**"Name: Harry Potter. Crime: Befouling the castle. Proposed punishment..."**

**Argus Filch, Harry Potter et la Chambre des Secrets, page 139**

## **Chapter 8.2: Tricks or Treats**

The grounds of Hogwarts were wet and muddy, that weekend. The lake still held some melting bits of ice from the two previous days of snowstorm. However, while those days had been bitter cold and windy and made the Slytherin dungeons so cold most of the Slytherins had preferred to either stick close to the fire or wander aimlessly around the school halls, today, it was so hot Harry Potter found himself loosening his collar and wiping sweat from his face with his bandanna.

"How the hell did it get so hot?!" He wondered out loud as he, Draco and Blaise walked in a hall on the ground level, like many other students. There was a fair, comfortable and cool breeze on the lower levels, for which everyone was grateful.

The two others shrugged. Some things, such as the weather, evaded even magical explanations.

The temperature was ideal for only three things. Swimming and laying in front of the AC. Unfortunately, as the ice in the waters betrayed, the lake was freezing cold, and Hogwarts had been built long before its invention. Not that wizards use them anyway. The third option was what Harry decided to do; solo flying.

Understandably, upon hearing the idea, Nemesis had slithered away back up the boys' dorms claiming that, being a crawling creature, he did NOT enjoy being suspended at heights easily thousands of times higher than him by nothing but a thin wooden handle. As Blaise and Draco were occupied in a heated discussion/aggressive negotiation with each other about his broom, which she wanted to use, neither of them heard nor noticed the snake slide away.

It ended with her gentle and calm suggestion/order of sticking it where the sun doesn't shine.

Brooms in hand, the three Slytherins lifted off. Harry grinned as he felt the unbelievable rush of freedom that came to him every time he left the ground. He gave a look behind him to look at how his friends were faring.

Blaise was rather unsteady on the school broom she had borrowed, while Draco was twirling around her in a teasing, annoying manner. He could hear her shouting, but the wind blocked out the words. A good thing, too, since her language was not likely to be something generally allowed for kids her age.

Twirling in mid-air, enjoying his first Bludger-free flight in well over a year, he looked around the spectacular sight that was the grounds of Hogwarts from the air. A good distance away, connected to the castle by a small dirt path that went to the Hogwarts express station, the wizarding village of Hogsmeade was visible, the thin trails of smoke pouring out of the many chimneys adding to the fine lake mist covering the horizon. Near the forest, Hagrid's hut stood tall, with the gigantic man tending to the giant pumpkins to be used on Halloween, the next week. Flying over the Quidditch pitch, seven crimson shapes easily identifiable as the Gryffindor Quidditch team were practicing.

He was so captivated by it all that he didn't notice the sky covering up until Draco tapped his shoulder and pointed at it.

"It's going to rain anytime, now." He noted. "We'd better go back."

Still wanting to fly a bit and hoping to avoid the rain, he shook his head.

"You and Blaise go back, I still want to fly a bit."

The platinum-haired boy gave him a smirk. "You *do* know that I'm going to laugh at you when you come in drenched, right?"

Harry gave him a cold glare, prompting the two to head back to the ground.

"Have a nice shower!" Blaise called after him as she sped away. At least, in theory she was, but speeding on brooms old enough to belong to Merlin was a task that not even the best flyer in the Quidditch league could manage.

He had no idea how long he had stayed in the air, just enjoying the breeze. His hair whipped in front of his face, partially hindering his vision.

'I need a haircut.' He noted idly.

A distant rumbling brought his attention to the dark clouds now directly above him. They looked heavy, as if they were ready to drop on his head at any time.

...and within a few seconds, they did.

Drenched, Harry landed in the entrance hall, not even bothering to get off his broom until he was indoors. Ignoring the shocked whispers from people around him, he attempted to walk back to the Slytherin dungeons, hoping to avoid Filch.

No such luck.

While he managed to barely dodge a grumbling Gryffindor ghost - whatever his name is - looking down at a piece of paper while reading it out loud to himself, his wet hair landed in his face again, this time on his glasses.

One second. He removed them, wiped them clean and was about to put them back on.

One second. That's all it took for something to trip him and make him fall in an unceremonious, wet heap on the stone floor. That something hissed angrily in a definitely cat-like manner, and Harry felt sudden pain as claws scratched his leg rather badly.

That something could only be Mrs. Norris, the only cat that had an attitude like that in the whole school.

'But then that means...' He began mentally, tensing up.

"YOU!!" A screech came from his left, causing him to tense up, accidentally crushing Norris further with his leg. "Messes and disorder! I've had enough!"

A tiny meow came from below Harry at that moment, making Filch suddenly livid. "And you *dare* step on my cat?!"

Harry was tempted to point out that Norris had been the one who had jumped in front of him. Before he could think of reasons why not, which included decapitation, dismemberment and general maiming of his physical and psychological self, Filch roughly grabbed his arm and pulled him off Norris, who gave him another rough scratch.

"Are you all right, my sweet?" He asked his cat in a very oddly affectionate manner. Harry suppressed a shudder, but it was a close call. When she replied with a meow, Filch turned his attention toward him. This time, not even a titanium wall could have stopped his flinch.

"You are coming with me." He barked, roughly pulling Harry by the arm, toward his office. Wincing at the painfully tight grip, Harry could only follow.

Filch's office was a welcoming place, perhaps if you were into masochism. Small, cold and rather gloomy, Harry idly thought it was fitting for its owner. One of the walls held cases filled with files,

containing whatever student misbehavior the caretaker had caught. A pair of cases was dedicated solely to Fred and George Weasley.

The man walked around his desk, moving the perfectly polished metal chains hanging from the roof along the way. More chains and manacles, just as finely entertained, hung on the wall behind him.

*“A real pain those softies removed corporal punishments...”* Filch had told him, Blaise, Hermione and Ron last year. *“Back then, they hung you upside down from the roof by your ankles for a few days...I still got the chains in my office, still usable, just in case those useless masses of fluff that call themselves governors decide to do something right for once.”*

Harry gulped and mentally thanked ‘those useless masses of fluff’.

Slowly, as if to savor Harry’s fear, Filch pulled out a file and laid it down on his desk, then just as slowly pulled out a quill and ink pot. Dipping the feather in the bottle, the caretaker turned his eyes toward his.

“Your name?” Filch asked.

Harry was famous in the wizarding world. In the Muggle world, he was all that was unwanted – at least, to what Muggle he knew. Anywhere he went, he was either completely ignored, or recognized on first glance. And never was he ever asked his name.

Understandably, Harry gaped.

“Your name?” Filch repeated irritably.

“Huh... Harry Potter.” He replied.

Filch's eyes went to the boy's bandanna-clad forehead for a second, before returning to the file as his quill danced on the paper, writing Harry's name.

"Name: Harry Potter. Crimes: Befouling the castle and attacking a member of the staff."

"Attac—She jumped in front of me!" Harry protested, frowning.

Grinning, Filch added: "Impoliteness toward a member of the staff" on the file.

"Anything to add?" The caretaker pleasantly asked with a smirk.

"...no sir." Seethed Harry.

With a sinister glint in his eyes, Filch returned to the file. "Punishment proposed: Two months of detention and sixty points from Slytherin."

Harry gasped in horror. *SIXTY* points?! Two *MONTHS*?! And since detention interfered with Quidditch practices, no Quidditch for two whole months! The folks of Slytherin were going to *hang* him!!

"No so happy now, are you?" The man asked with a dark chuckle, getting up and depositing the file in a case. The file vanished in a puff of green flames before Filch sat down again. "You should have thought of that *before* crushing my precious Norris..."

"B..But..."

"Hmm? Do you have anything else to say?" The caretaker from hell asked, bending forward on his desk. "I'd be more than glad to add to your case..."

The case in which Harry's file had been deposited into suddenly exploded in green fire as the file came back and landed on Filch's desk. Eagerly, the man read it, before his smile vanished, replaced by an angry scowl.

"Why... that softie... Stay here, Potter. I have something to tell your head of house."

And Filch, followed closely by his cat, walked out of his office, leaving Harry alone.

Curious, Harry waited ten seconds, to make sure Filch was really gone, then flipped the file around and read it.

Underneath the information Filch had written, a message written by hand had been added in a small, tight yet easily readable writing.

*Punishment allowed: 1 detention, 5 points from Slytherin, 1 meeting with Head of House to be scheduled*

S. Snape

Grinning, Harry mentally thanked Professor Snape. *That* punishment he was able to take. Happily, he turned the page back around carelessly, accidentally making a piece of paper drop to the floor. He got down and picked it up. It was a letter.

*Kwikspell*

*A Correspondence Course in Beginners' magic*

Harry blinked. Filch was taking correspondence Magic lessons? Before he could investigate any deeper, however, he heard Filch's voice in the hallway.

"...Softy, shouldn't be allowed to give out punishments..."

Quickly, Harry slipped the paper back on the desk, exactly where he remembered it being. He sat back down just in time as the caretaker walked back in.

"You're still here?!" Filch barked, glaring. "Get out!"

Harry nodded with a gulp and, not wanting to push his luck, ran out.

~~~~~

"You got caught by Filch!?" Was Blaise's reaction upon hearing his adventure. In fact, he had made quite a scene upon entering the common room; The famous Harry Potter, wet, with a big tear on the hem of his robes, his leg scratched and bleeding, but not seeming all that mad, strolling into the entrance.

"So, how many weeks of detention did he give you?" Draco asked.

"He gave me two months..."

"WHAT?!" His two friends chorused.

"But Snape lowered it to one detention and five points from Slytherin. Oh, and I have to meet him, too." Harry finished.

"...So you mean you walked in, made a mess, tripped on Norris and got off easy?" Draco asked with a grin. "Good job!"

"More like luckhy break." Nemesis muttered as he slid back toward Harry, who picked him up and let him coil around his arm.

The lucky break, however, turned rotten pretty soon.

"H..He can't do that!!" Harry protested, glaring at the offending piece of parchment in his hands. "Not today!!"

"That absolute *bastard!!* It was bad enough that we couldn't enjoy it *last year!*" Blaise said with a frown. "Even if some of us spent it playing 'knight in shining armor saving the princess Hermione'..."

“With Weasley-the-sidekick.” Draco added.

To Harry Potter

Your detention will be held today, at 7:10 in the trophy room

Argus Filch

“The trophy room?” Draco asked, blinking. “So *that’s* why he didn’t clean it this week!”

“...you have *got* to be kidding me.” Harry said in a low voice. “The bastard is holding my detention during the feast, cleaning what’s probably by now the dirtiest room in the whole school, probably without magic?! I’ll barely have any time left for the feast!”

“Worse than that, Harry.” Crabbe said as he and Goyle sat down. They had been terrorizing a pair of first year Ravenclaws. Goyle was idly flicking through a magazine called *The Quibbler*. “Peeves found out Filch wasn’t cleaning his messes in there. I heard nobody dared to get in that room all week.”

“...oh crud.” Harry sighed, massaging his forehead. He had the feeling this would *not* be a good day.

A visit to the trophy room during the morning proved him that his feelings were correct. The place was an absolute *mess*! A thin, but present layer of dust covered everything and the floor was oddly less shiny at spots, as if someone had dropped water on the ground let it evaporate. But that was not the worst.

...it was the multicolored paint splattered over the walls, the glass casings, the roof... By multicolored, this author means it in a magical sense, as the paint looked like an oddly distorted rainbow, or motor oil in water.

Harry was tempted to clean it all up right there, but Mrs Norris had been keeping a close eye on him all week. And as he took out his wand, her eyes glowed with an almost gleeful light, as if she enjoyed seeing students in trouble as well.

‘They say the pets are like their owners... I’d say they’re right.’

Harry’s mood did not improve during the day, either. It seemed the feast and “How great it’s going to be” was the only subject of discussion on everyone’s mouths – Except for Goyle, who spend half an hour telling a pair of very bored Pansy and Millicent about some ancient magical kingdom on the moon, which he read out of the snitched magazine; he stopped when Draco pointed out that the *Quibbler* published nothing but rubbish. Perhaps Harry had eavesdropped on the first two times he had heard someone talk about the feast, but after the tenth time, it had gotten old. By the twentieth, his teeth started to gnash together and by four in the afternoon, he was starting to feel a tad murderous.

‘The next person who talks about it in my earshot is going to get hexed.’ He swore.

“Um, Harry?” A soft, shy and female voice came to his ears.

“What!?” He snapped, turning toward the girl.

It was Ginny, who squeaked a quick “nothn’!” and ran away, clutching a small black book in her arms.

His mood softened a bit, if only to leave place for shame in his anger. The poor girl had enough problems like that; there was no need to snap at her. He made a mental note to apologize to her later, when he didn’t feel an urge to commit an atrocious homicide using the nearest sharp, semi-sharp or pointy object.

The bell rang seven. At four places in the school, doors opened and students piled out of their common rooms, heading for the great hall, which had been richly decorated for the occasion.

Twenty minutes later, they would feast on delicious Hogwarts food prepared even more dutifully than usual.

"See you later, Harry!" Draco called.

"We'll save... erm... *try* to save some for you!" Blaise added as reassuringly as someone saying: "Jump down the bungee rope to see if it's long enough".

They, of course, did *not* include Harry Potter, who turned and walked opposite direction at the first corner, as to avoid humiliating and angering confrontations with anyone. Along the way, however, he ran into two ghosts he didn't know, both of whom seemed to *also* be in a festive mood, heading deeper in the dungeons.

'Even the dead are having a better night than me.' He noted sourly.

Filch hadn't cleaned the trophy room one bit, he noted to his unsurprised displeasure. It was still as messy; perhaps more. A small, pitiful, rusty metal bucket and an old, paled mop made of wood busy in a believable impersonation of a cactus and long, dirty cloth threads that seemed to have decided to rest in some motor oil for a while.

"Clean the floor and walls with the mop, then the glass casings with the sponge in the bucket." Filch said with a sinister, sadistic, satisfied smirk. "I want to be able to see my reflection on this floor when I come back."

How anyone would want to see Filch's reflection *anywhere*, even this Writer doesn't know. As for Harry, he could only glare at the caretaker's departing back while grabbing what looked to be the softest part of the mop – which didn't prevent him from feeling like he had decided to grab a porcupine in his fist.

Cleaning the floor proved to be rather easy; years of practice scrubbing everything scrubbable – or not – at the Dursleys' had given him plenty of experience. His mind wandered wherever it could, all the while checking up on his body's progress, as if he had put it on autopilot.

'Kwikspell... Filch is taking correspondence magic lessons. But why? I mean... he's plenty old enough to have finished learning all the spells he'd need...' He thought, frowning. 'Come to think about it, I don't think I've ever seen him do magic... or his wand, for that matter.'

Beginners' magic, the letter had said.

'...Could he be a Muggle?' Harry hypothesized, moving himself to scrub a particularly tenacious stain of dark red paint. 'But why would he be allowed in Hogwarts then?'

The stain gone, he dunked the head of the mop in the bucket before resuming his cleaning, and thoughts.

'Blaise is Half-blood... she has magic, even though her father is a Muggle.' He suddenly thought. 'Hermione's parents are both Muggles, but she's definitely a witch, and a wickedly good one, too.'

'On the other hand, Longbottom is pure-blood, but if he can ever manage a proper potion, I'll eat Dudley's socks.' He made a mental note to foil every single potion the plump wizard-in-training made, then triple-underlined and highlighted it. 'Maybe Filch is like that, only worse? A wizard-born without magic?'

Harry straightened up, happily noting he had already cleaned the floor. Only the walls and glass casings were left.

'No wonder he's so rotten and a general pain in the arse, then...' He finished with a small smirk. 'He has to be bitter.'

The walls proved to be, while a tad harder than the floor, easy as well. As he splotched away the last bit of red paint off the stone, he wondered why Filch had assigned work as easy as this; normally, he would have went out of his way to make Harry suffer, and while his hands were feeling a bit raw from the old wood handle, he knew the caretaker was usually harder.

His knowledge was accurate. The sponge, as he pulled it out of the bucket, proved to have the consistency of bread. Old, on-the-edge-of-rotten, crumbling, "don't shake me" bread, that is.

And the paint on the casings had the tenacity and solidity of concrete.

Ok, maybe not, but pretty darn close.

With every bit of pressure Harry applied, a bit of the sponge fell on the floor. Dunking it was an adventure in itself, while passing it over solidified paint caused an effect not unlike snow.

That he managed to wipe the paint off the two first casings was nothing short of a miracle. Nearly losing half his sponge in a dunk in the bucket, he glared at the reward he was polishing, a 'magical merit' trophy for extremely high grades, given to a certain T.M. Riddle.

'Probably some bookworm.' He thought, thinking that Hermione had a good chance of snitching that trophy.

By the time he made it to the back wall, he already felt like he had nothing but a handful of crusty sponge left in his fist. He also felt like his palms were being more efficient than said cleaning tool. Pausing a second to rest his arms, he looked at what was left of work.

Only a handful of casings were left to clean. Grumbling, his stomach replying in the same manner, Harry looked with disinterest at the golden sign at the base of the window he had been furiously attacking not thirty seconds ago.

Head boys/girls

Harry snorted, imagining a box of glass filled to the brim with Percy-look-alikes. With a quick stretch of his arms, he returned to work absentmindedly noting some of the names on the shiny golden medals.

M.E. Goshawk

T.M. Riddle

'Heh. Him again.' He thought distractedly.

J.A. Mackinson

L.D. Malfoy

‘Hmm... Malfoy, eh? Wonder if Draco knows...’

G.L. Lovegood

L.O. Evans

J.K. Potter

H.V— “Potter?!”

Stopping his scrubbing, he gazed at the metal plate bearing his family name. More writing, in a small, less visible size, were visible if one looked closely.

James Keith Potter

Gryffindor

72-79

“I honestly don’t know what Dumbledore is thinking!”

Chuckling at the quote, he gave a look at the dates, to see who was head girl at that time. Immediately at his father’s medal’s left, the plate bearing the name of L.O. Evans matched.

Lily Orchiddea Evans

Slytherin

72-79

“Heh, finally got a hand over the Marau—what? James is head boy?! How? Why? How?”

Now laughing and wondering exactly how the quotes were taken, he looked outside, at the night sky. It was pitch black, by now. The sun had set hours ago, leaving nothing but the burning fire and the glittering torches as sources of light. It was plenty enough, however. Although it reminded him how far into the night he was, and how Filch would be back eventually.

Resuming his cleaning, he turned his thoughts toward the plates, while moving toward the casing marked “Service to the school”.

As he cleaned, he noticed a silver medal, shining brightly under the dim torch light.

Service to the school

Awarded to T.M. Riddle,

1942

“Blimey, what was he? A super-hero?” Harry wondered out loud. “Best grades, head boy, and now service to the school... probably bribed the teachers. No way *anyone’s* that good.”

His musings were interrupted by a loud yet soft hissing that pronounced indecipherable words. The voice was oddly familiar.

“Nemesis?” He called. “Is that you?”

‘No... Nemesis’ voice is higher-pitched than that...’ Harry thought darkly.

Suddenly, her heard a loud metallic clang, followed by a splashing noise and a chilly, wet feel on his socks. Whirling around, he saw the rusty metal bucket had spilled over, flooding the floor with colorful water.

“That’s just *great*.” Harry grumbled, looking for the mop to clean everything up quickly before the paint managed to imprint itself in the floor again. Unfortunately, it seemed to have vanished. “Can anything else go wrong?!”

Apparently, he yet hadn’t learned one of the first lessons on ‘how to be a good character’. Especially not the class for “Cue for troubles: whining questions in mid-air = BAD”.

“Looking for this?” A doubled, altered voice Harry recognized as under the *Vox Diabolus* spell he had used back in Knockturn alley, said with a dark chuckle. Its source was a dark-robed figure a tiny bit taller than him, whose face was hidden under a large, pointed hat. It gave no indication over who it was – every student at Hogwarts had that kind of hat and robes. And because of the spell’s alteration on its voice, there was no way of guessing the person’s age or sex.

In its hand was the rough handle of the mop.

“Yeah, could you give it back?” He asked, frowning. Whoever it was, it was going to get into serious trouble for spilling that bucket like that.

The figure chuckled and, without warning, burst into a run.

“H-HEY!!” Harry called after it, taking the chase.

Whoever it was, it sure could run, as Harry noticed during the first ten seconds. While he wasn’t the fastest man on foot, he prided himself on being rather fast and agile – a prerequisite for being Dudley’s official punching bag back in grade school. Whoever it was, it was faster than him and was putting up a good chase in the twisting hallways of Hogwarts. It also seemed to know its way around, as it demonstrated by using a secret passage Harry had never noticed before.

More irritating yet, Harry was *certain* he heard it chuckle in that eerie, doubled voice.

‘It’s *playing* with me!!’ Harry growled, whipping out his wand from his pocket. However, before he could cast a curse, the figure had reached an intersection. With a wild movement, it threw the mop to its right and dashed at the left.

By the time Harry made it to the intersection and turned left, the figure was already gone, with no sign of having ever been there.

“Stupid prank.” Harry cursed, taking a step to turn around. To his surprise, his foot made a wet splashing sound as it came in contact with the ground.

“Great.” He growled, looking down at the nearly invisible puddle of water on the floor. “I’ll probably get blamed for that too.”

He slowly bent down and picked the damaged mop off the floor. It was then he noticed something... a reflection in the water. He looked back up at its source...

...and gawped.

There, written on the black, moldy stones of the wall was written a simple, foreboding message, imprinted in an unnatural-looking ink, shining brightly between two burning torches.

“The chamber of secrets has been opened!

Enemies of the heir... beware!”

Mrs. Norris was hanging by her tail, stiff as a board, her eyes wide in stilled surprise, the fur on her back half-standing, as if she had been photographed Muggle-style in the middle of hissing.

A loud impact came from the other end of the hall as the unmistakable cacophony of a hundred simultaneous conversations flooded the corridor. The great hall doors had burst open and students had started to walk back to their dormitories.

Harry felt his entire body chill, his brain lock into motion at trying to find some reasonable explanation for his presence there. Or, at least, a reasonable explanation for being out of the trophy room, one that included no mysterious running figures – who’d believe that, honestly?

'Maybe I'd better run?' The thought flitted through his head, but he quickly banished it. Running would be useless – *who* was alone, unwatched during the Halloween feast? And *who* was the *only one* without an alibi?

Soon, though, it was too late. The first few students froze as soon as they spotted the cat, with Harry standing directly in front of it.

Harry noticed, however, that their eyes darted to himself, to the cat, to the message and to each of his hands.

He looked down at the mop in his hand and then quickly dropped it.

The strands were still red from the paint, in a tint eerily alike to the ink on the wall.

And his other hand held his wand.

'Oh bugger it, I just *jumped* into this one...' He thought darkly.

"Harry?" Blaise's voice crossed the crowd as she, Draco, Xu and Emma appeared.

Harry noticed Draco's eyes widened and something that was unmistakably recognition come to his face, before he looked at Blaise, just as fearfully.

"What's going..." Blaise's voice trailed off as she spotted the cat.
"...oh."

'Thank you for the resume, Blaise.' He grumbled. 'Can anything go worse?'

sigh Harry, your lessons!!

"What's going on here?!" A grumbling voice came from deeper in the sea of students as another unwanted witness arrived. Filch. The sadistic caretaker burst through the front row, pushing Xu directly into a rather tall Hufflepuff prefect, and froze upon seeing the scene.

'Ok, now I'm screwed.' Harry gulped, involuntarily taking a step back in horror.

"MY CAT!!" He roared, pointing at Norris. "YOU! You... You killed her!!"

Harry wanted to take a step back, this time, but found there was a wall standing in his way. Filch's hands made a throttling motion as he advanced toward the Slytherin boy, glaring eyes pointed at his neck. Harry gripped his wand tighter, ready to use it if needed.

'If he takes another step...' He thought, preparing a full body-bind hex.

"Argus, stop this instant!" Dumbledore's voice came to his rescue – of Harry or Filch, neither knew – as it was the elderly headmaster's turn, along with Professor Snape's and McGonagall's, to enter the stage. The latter gaped at the message then stared accusingly at Harry, who barely held a scowl that would only have made things worse.

"Minerva, please untie Mrs. Norris. Argus, do try to calm down. Mr. Potter, follow me." The headmaster politely ordered.

Enter the circus. "My office is the closest, Professor Dumbledore, sir." Gilderoy "legally blonde" Lockhart quickly quipped, as if needing to tell Dumbledore, who had most likely spent four times more time at Hogwarts than himself. "If you wish to use it..."

"Thank you, Gilderoy." Dumbledore said.

Professor Snape put a hand on Harry's shoulder then turned to the crowd. "I don't believe you are all necessary." He coldly stated, glaring at the assembled students. "Get to your common rooms."

Many students did so, but most of them hesitated. At least, until the authoritarian teacher barked a diamond-sharp: "That was *not* a suggestion."

Now, only three were left.

"That goes to you as well, Mr. Malfoy, Zabini and Miss Granger." He hissed.

"They can stay." Dumbledore said. "I believe they want to hear this as much as we do."

Lockhart's office was a frightening place. Not in an eerie sense... relatively speaking, or in a creepy one – also relatively speaking. Harry had never been inside, but he had known enough about the egocentric teacher to suppose an intelligent guess. And he was completely right.

There was hardly a flat area, in the small, brightly lit office that was not occupied by either a painting of the teacher, a mirror or, in one case, a painting of Lockhart that was painting a Lockhart that was painting a Lockhart until the images became too small for even atoms to be able to discern them. The surface of his oak desk was riddled with graded, to-be-graded papers, a handheld mirror and a collection of his books.

There were, unfortunately, only two chairs. Dumbledore sat on the large, comfy, neon-purple couch behind the desk – the two of which clashed so horribly they seemed to be at war – while Filch crashed down on the other, much harder, wooden chair.

Harry and his friends stood, looking at the desk. It was better than the rest of the room. Dumbledore pushed some papers away to make room for Norris. As Dumbledore, Professor Snape and McGonagall analyzed the cat – and Lockhart made a fool of himself twittering – pun intended – about some Transmogrifian Torture.

Finally, Dumbledore spoke.

"She's not dead, Argus." He said, turning toward Filch.

"N-Not dead?" The caretaker repeated disbelievingly. "But why is she all stiff?"

"She's been petrified." The elderly man said.

"That's what I thought, too." The twit quipped.

"The only question that remains is... how?" Dumbledore asked.

Filch suddenly seemed to remember Harry was there as his eyes locked on their target. He growled angrily and got up, sending the chair he had been sitting on clattering on the floor.

"You should ask *him* that!!" He roared, pointing at Harry. "He's the one who did it!!"

"No second year student, even a Slytherin, could have the knowledge required to petrify anything." Dumbledore said.

"It's him! It's him I tell you! You saw the mop, he's the one who wrote the message! And he hates me!!"

"The same can easily be said for every other student in the school, Filch." Professor Snape reminded coldly.

"He kicked Norris!!" He added.

"Your cat has the nasty tendency of jumping in people's legs." The teacher retorted. "Hardly counts as a 'kick'."

"Although it *is* curious," McGonagall finally spoke "that young mister Potter was at the scene, wand out and holding the writing tool—"

"Watch your words," Snape growled at McGonagall. "There is no proof that that mop even *was* used."

"Perhaps," Dumbledore interrupted "we should hear Mister Potter's version of the facts before throwing accusations."

Harry froze as seven pairs of eyes turned toward him. Even his friends were apparently curious. He gave a look at Professor Dumbledore, who nodded encouragingly and smiled, eyes twinkling. A bit hesitatingly, he told the story, skipping over the odd, hissing voice.

‘Hearing voices wouldn’t be a good sign in the wizarding world either.’ He reminded himself.

“Headmaster, I think this story is very much farfetched.” McGonagall voiced, her eyes staring directly at Harry’s. “Perhaps this boy is not entirely telling the truth on the matter--”

“I see no reason not to believe him,” Professor Snape cut in. “He is only a second year, and doesn’t nearly possess enough knowledge to cast a petrification spell. It is something very few wizards are capable of, after all.”

“Perhaps he was helped.” McGonagall said. “Need I remind you of *her*? ”

Snape gave her a look. “I hardly doubt that *she* would come back here. His story sounds more believable than yours, now.”

“I don’t care what you all think!” Filch roared “My cat has been petrified! I demand punishment!!”

The eyes were now on Dumbledore, who stayed silent for a few seconds. His eyes turned toward the three other members of the staff as he broke the silence.

“Innocent until proven guilty, Argus.”

“B...But my cat...”

“Pompona has managed to get young Mandrakes for her Herbology class.” Dumbledore said.

“Pompona?” Blaise repeated in a whisper, blinking.

“Probably Professor Sprout.” Hermione replied on the same tone.

“Once they reach adult age, we will be able to brew a potion to bring Mrs. Norris back to normal.”

Harry couldn’t help but feel disappointed. He had hoped that, perhaps, the day hadn’t been *totally* wasted.

"I'll take care of it," Lockhart declared. "I must have done it a hundred times."

Harry suddenly felt hopeful that, perhaps, this day would be memorably good.

"Excuse me," Professor Snape hissed, glaring at the blonde. "But the potions master here is *me*."

Harry's disappointment came back full force.

Dumbledore turned his attention toward the students. "You may leave." He told them.

"Potter, wait for me outside of the room. I wish to speak with you privately."

How long Harry waited, he didn't know. Draco and Blaise had both left, saying they'd wait for him in the common room. He could hear muffled conversations through the door, but couldn't make out what was being said. Finally, Filch burst out, carrying Norris' statue. Harry flattened himself against the wall and, fortunately, the caretaker walked the opposite direction, toward the infirmary. McGonagall and Dumbledore walked out next, the woman shooting him a glance as she went, while the man acted like he wasn't there.

"Ah, yes, Potter." Snape's voice made him jump as the black-haired man burst out of Lockhart's office. "Follow me."

Being led by Snape down to his office was a rather scary experience, especially if you feared you were in trouble. Harry had done it twice before, last year. Once when he had caught Neville's Rememberall and earned himself a place in the Quidditch team, and the other time just before boarding the Hogwarts Express. Both had been rather unpleasant experiences.

The room had about the same air. There was a single, candle-lit table covered by graded or to-be-graded papers with a single wooden chair, a dark, gloomy atmosphere, a tightly locked dresser, a simple wooden desk with face-down pictures and a shelf of unmentionable, mysterious unknown... things in bottles hanging from the wall.

A keen observer, however, would have noticed that few of the pictures had been moved, set back up. The walls were definitely not as naked, also. Harry managed to see what seemed to be a graduation picture. However, the colors weren't too good, and the people on it were quite too fuzzy to be recognizable from afar.

"Harry Potter," Snape began, sitting down on the sole chair, moving the candle aside to get a clear view. "I must admit, I'm impressed you lasted so long before finding yourself here. Last year, you barely stood two weeks, while this year, you managed almost exactly..." A quick look at the clock later, the professor corrected himself: "exactly two months."

"Er..." Harry didn't quite know how to answer to that. Fortunately, Snape continued, relieving Harry of having to think of a proper response.

"I do believe, last time I saw you, that I had asked you to tell me if you ever saw something strange in the school; to go to *me* directly."

"I-I didn't!" At his raised eyebrow, Harry took his turn to correct himself. "I mean, I didn't see anything weird until today, I swear!"

"No need to be so defensive. I believe you. And this only makes things more alarming. At least Quirrell had been stupid enough to leave clues. Let this be a reminder, however." He bent forward on the table, staring at Harry directly in the eyes. "Be careful this year, Harry."

"Harry Potter must not go back to Hogwarts!"

"Actually, sir, I just remembered! Dobby, the house-elf!"

"Dobby? Lucius Malfoy's elf? What does he have to do with our current predicament?"

Harry told him his misadventures with the rather brutal house-elf who apparently wanted to save his life by ending his life.

"Hmm." was all Professor Snape said as Harry finished the story. The professor slowly got up and strode in the dim moonlight streaming out of the dirty, thin window near the ceiling of his room, a thoughtful expression on his face. "Most peculiar..." He mused out loud. "That elf is quite obedient, usually... Was there anything else?"

"Uh... no." Harry said, making a mental list. Nope, nothing else to say.

"Very well. Then *I* have something to tell you." He turned toward Harry. "I have noticed you've been keeping a diary."

"Err..." A bit taken aback, Harry didn't quite know what to do, once again. For a lack of better answer, he nodded.

"I only have this to tell you: Be *very* careful around it. Your thoughts and feelings make up who you are. Without those, a person is hardly more than a robot – an empty shell. Knowing how someone thinks is the best way to control that person. One should always be wary of who they confide into, unless it is not in their interests of betraying those thoughts. Or, if they are inanimate."

Still nodding, Harry let the teacher continue talking.

"I won't hide it from you, neither will anyone - You have many enemies, Potter. One of them being the most powerful and evil wizard of the century. If someone with bad intentions were to access your thoughts, the results could be most dire. They should, therefore, be more guarded than the holy grail."

"Umm... then... should I stop?"

"No." Professor Snape replied. "I have a feeling you will come to be *very* grateful for being able to write down your thoughts in the coming years. Now, I believe Mr. Malfoy and miss Zabini are waiting for you in the common room. You'd best not keep them waiting."

The hallways were deserted. Filch apparently had no wish of strolling about that night. Grateful, Harry easily made it to the common room.

Harry noticed Blaise and Draco sitting on the sofa near the fire, inside the common room, which had become their usual seat ever since Draco had blackmailed the ‘inferior’ older students into scamming. Apparently, more than one family was afraid of the Malfoys.

Ginny, Xu and Emma were also up – although the latter and former seemed to be on the edge of falling asleep on the nervous Asian – sitting on the sofa in front of theirs. They woke up as soon as Ginny squeaked his name and everyone’s attention went to him. Tiredly, he let himself down beside Blaise.

For a moment, no one talked, until Xu cleared her throat.

“Good wo’k, Harry.” She said, smiling.

“Good job,” Emma corrected, before smirking. “And I agree. But did you have to make it so creepy? This whole... chamber of secret thing...”

Harry sighed. If even people who at least *remotely* knew him believed he was guilty, was there hope for the rest of the school?

“It wasn’t me.” He said.

“I told you.” Ginny quipped, turning to her two friends. “Harry wouldn’t do something like that.”

Feeling grateful for the Weasley girl, Harry gave her a smile. She immediately looked down, blushing to the roots of her hair. Her fist clenched tightly around her small black book.

“But then, who?” Emma asked, blinking.

“The heir of Slytherin.” Draco darkly said. “That’s who.”

“You know something.” Blaise said. It wasn’t a question.

Draco nodded. “It’s an old legend, passed on only among the highest-ranked, strictly-Slytherin families, like mine, from father to son. An ancient story, dating of the time of the founders. It is said that if any Slytherin breathed a word of this to a student from another house, that Slytherin and the rest of their families would face the wrath of an powerful, mythical curse –”

“Hurry up, you spotlight-hugger.” Blaise growled.

The platinum-haired boy shot her a dark look, then shrugged and laid back in the couch. “Well, father hasn’t really told me all that much about it. They say the heir of Slytherin has the power to open the chamber of secrets, which was built by Salazar Slytherin himself, hidden somewhere in the school. That chamber holds something that would rid the school of all half-bloods and muggle-borns.

“But we’re all safe, right?” Emma said. “After all, only pure-bloods make it in Slytherin...”

“I’m half.” Blaise noted darkly.

“My mom was Muggle-born.” Harry reminded. “That makes me a half, too.”

“...oh.” The dark-brown haired girl eeped and shut up.

“Besides, the heir attacked a *cat*. Do you really think that he’s all that selective of his targets?”

Harry nodded thoughtfully. “If I were him, I’d have attacked Filch, it would have made more of an effect than his cat. Now he lost the element of surprise. Sloppy...”

Everyone stared at him, causing him to stutter a quick and defensive: “Not that I’ve thought about it!!”

“Well,” Draco declared with a theatrical yawn, “I’m knackered. I don’t know about you, but I don’t fancy being a living dead tomorrow... what’s the first class, already?”

“I think it’s PRAT, first thing.”

“Oh, great.” The boy sighed sarcastically. “We get to see Lockhart’s face first thing after waking up. Stuff of nightmares, that... well I’m off.”

He got up and left. Soon, the rest of the group started dozing off, but only when Blaise nearly fell asleep on Harry’s lap did they commonly decide to call it a day.

“Oh, Ginny!” Harry said, just before the girl walked up the stairs to her dormitory. “Can I talk to you, just a second?”

The girl, puzzled and, doing her best to hide her blush – to her credit, her ears were barely visible behind her hair – stayed down until they were alone in the common room.

“Look, erm... sorry about how I snapped at you, earlier...” He apologized. “It wasn’t really my day, and—”

“It’s ok!” Ginny squeaked, her face now bright red. “I understand!”

“I just wanted to apologize.” He said, smiling. Taking a breath, he stretched a bit. “Well, I guess I’d better be off to bed, and you, too.”

“Bed...?” If it was possible, Ginny turned a shade redder. “Oh, right! ‘night!”

And Harry chuckled as her frantic footsteps climbed up the stairs.

That crush of hers was the cutest thing he had seen. In a childish sense, that is. It seemed to be more of a schoolgirl hero worship than a real crush.

However, it was, and he wasn’t afraid to call it that way, the funniest thing to play around with.

Get to that snitch before Malfoy, or die trying, Harry because we've to win today, we've got to."

“So no pressure, Harry.”

Oliver Wood, Fred Weasley, From VMorticia's edition of Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, page 126

Chapter 9: Bloody Bludger

His life was in danger. He knew it all too well, and he had known it even before he had thrown himself imprudently in the jaws the lion. Speeding ahead, feeling the air whip against his face, his ears were open for the tell-tale sound of his enemy's weapons, his body tensed to dart away at the slightest signal.

Viiizzzzzz

His body twisting on its own volition, he barely avoided the deadly attack thrown at him, in the form of a six inch wide iron ball. Once again, he wondered what had possessed him to do such a foolish thing, to agree to what was certainly the most assured chance of losing a limb, whether it be an arm, a leg or, should he be lucky, a head.

Harry Potter was practicing Quidditch, Slytherin style.

Flint's latest idea was giving fruits, now. After being rammed into a thousand times by those lord-blasted Bludgers, Harry was *starting* to instinctively avoid the iron balls. It wasn't enough for Flint, however, who seemed to want them to avoid them before their minds even located them. As it was, the team was averagely successful, apart from Draco. The unlucky boy, who had just joined the team a month ago, was now forced through a training regimen that even Adrian Pucey, who had four years of experience as Chaser, struggled through.

The only ones who were thoroughly enjoying this were Derrick and Bole. In fact, they were enjoying this a bit too much and tended to get very much enthusiastic about it. Considering it made their training harder, Flint encouraged them – as long as he wasn't targeted too often or too hard.

Harry, however, enjoyed it. Not because he was masochist, or because he was weird, but because Quidditch was the perfect escape from the hellish two days he had gone through.

November first had been hard to take for his mood. As he had feared, most of the student population of Hogwarts believed him guilty of petrifying Mrs Norris. However, nobody acted – outside of faint, yet annoying whispers – as, quite frankly, everyone was grateful. Filch, having lost his better half, was nowhere near as efficient as usual, a fact that the Weasley twins enjoyed thoroughly – for once being able to drive the caretaker crazy by pulling off two messy pranks simultaneously at different places, confusing him just enough so both got out unharmed – even though everyone knew it was them.

November second had been hard to take, this time, for his nerves. Lockhart had given them a particularly painful lesson, the events of the previous Saturday having ‘suddenly’ reminded himself of an adventure he had lived a while ago – the date varying between “right before receiving Dumbledore’s offer” and “a couple of years ago, when I had just started traveling.”.

It was a play. A horrible, full-class long play, which the Slytherin class only managed to survive through by either thoroughly riffing it or by

thoroughly fancying Lockhart. A story about a village, who's location was set as somewhere, "deep in the jungles of Transylvania", who was being terrorized by an old hag, who had for sole pleasure in life of petrifying one member of the village each month and hang them over her doormat.

It only got worse once the roles were distributed by the grinning idiot. And the following words within the quotation marks are what Lockhart's own words were.

Draco was stuck with "despaired, yet hopeful mayor glad to finally see a true hero come into his town"

Harry had received the unenviable role of being the "clumsy, yet useful sidekick, awed of being in my presence"

Pansy and Millicent both were "villagers who dearly hope for peaceful days"

Crabbe and Goyle ended up being "slow and dim-witted minions of the old hag"...

...and Blaise was the hag.

She was *not* happy.

Especially not when Lockhart had stuck his handheld mirror in her face and she had been forced to "recoil in terror of her own hideousness"

And certainly not when Crabbe had messed up and told her she was a good actress.

His voice had had an odd, soprano sound to it for the rest of the day. And his steps still held a strange, inexplicable limp that had nothing to do with his legs.

Unfortunately, Blaise's irritated mood had proven infectious and soon, Harry and Draco both found themselves dearly wishing the day ended quickly.

No such luck, they had history, next.

And now, here he was, on November third, in the bitter cold, icy and wet air, suspended from a potentially fatal fall only by a thin wooden broom handle, dodging iron balls aimed at his head, trying to find a small golden ball with wings for the third time in half a hour so his fanatic-of-a-Quidditch captain didn't break his poor, poor voice yelling at him...

...and feeling the best he had in three days.

The practice ended after Flint was caught by two Bludgers at the same time. Dismissing the rest of the team, he went berserk on Derrick and Bole, berating them for "trying to take one of our star players a week before the game against Gryffindor!"

The said rest were quite grateful, however.

"I have no idea how you managed to survive last year." Draco moaned as he crashed down on their sofa.

"Honestly, me either." Harry replied flatly, imitating his friend. "Though, Flint wasn't as bad last year."

"Tough practice?" Blaise asked with a smug grin, an open box of Bertie Bott's beans in her left hand. Ginny was sitting beside her, chewing with gusto on a bean with an odd look on her face, as if trying to decide if she liked the flavor or not.

"Flint's trying to kill us." Harry replied simply. "I reckon he thinks we'll have less to worry about during the match if we're ghosts."

"Well, yeah," Ginny slid in. "you won't have to worry about dodging the Bludgers if you're ghosts."

Harry turned to Ginny, who had settled her decision by swallowing the offending bean. He was a bit surprised; this was the first time she had actively got into one of their conversations. Taking this as a good sign, he allowed himself a smile.

“It’d be a tad harder to throw the Quaffle, though.” Draco mused.

Harry blinked and looked at Draco. He had expected the prideful Malfoy boy to ignore the Slytherin Weasley, as he had done since she had been sorted. He gave a look at Blaise, but apparently she hadn’t noticed – or perhaps it was because she was currently busy trying to get rid of the fire in her mouth, induced by a red pepper bean.

Harry hadn’t seen Hagrid much, since the start of the year. In fact, apart from their timely meeting at Diagon Alley and the short peek at the Hogwarts express station, he hadn’t seen him at all since last end of term. So, the next morning, he was surprised when an owl came in for him, dropping a small note written in a large, barely readable scrawl on a rough, uneven bit of parchment.

Harry,

I want to see you sometime today. Come at Dinner time.

Hagrid

Naturally, he had agreed.

Perfectly knowing what Hagrid’s idea of cooking was, Harry stuffed himself at breakfast, until he felt his stomach would burst. His Transfiguration class afterwards was rather tough to bear. He was grateful, however, that they didn’t have to use magic that morning – he felt that, should he dare open his mouth, his food would see the light of day again.

During the break between classes, Harry, Blaise and Draco stumbled onto Ginny, Xu and Emma.

“Are you all right, Harry?” Emma asked. “You look a bit pale.”

“He ate too much.” Blaise replied.

“Why?” Xu wondered.

"Going to Hagrid's at Dinner. No way I'm eating his food." Harry replied as best as he could.

"Hagweed? Big bea'ded man on boat?" Xu asked again. "Why you... a'you seeing Hagweed?"

Harry paled. Draco snorted. Blaise turned green. Ginny and Emma both slapped their foreheads at their friend's mistake. Xu, at their reaction, was understandably confused.

"Why everyone react like that?"

Ginny whispered something in the Asian girl's ear, prompting her to suddenly blush and sputter. "*No mean you dating!!*" She practically shrieked, bowing at Harry. "Dui Bu Qi!!"

"It's... err... ok." Harry replied, not quite knowing what she had just said, while trying to get rid of the very disturbing image. Once again, he wondered how and why she had entered Hogwarts, if she barely spoke English.

"Harry!!" A girl's voice called.

It was Hermione, who was waving at him from a distance, holding Ron by the sleeve. The red-haired boy was scowling at her angrily, trying to get free.

"Leggo!" He snapped, tearing out of her hold.

"Ron, stop being such a git!" She snapped back, reaching for him again.

Moving out of her range, he shot the Slytherins a final dark, hateful look and strode away, leaving a fuming Hermione behind.

"I swear, that *idiot!*" She growled.

"He'll come around eventually, Hermione." Blaise reassured her, walking up to her friend and patting her on the back. "And if he doesn't by the time the year's through, we can always hex him."

Hermione shot her a warning look then turned to Harry. “Sorry about that. I’ve been trying to get him to apologize...”

“No need.” Ginny sadly said. “I don’t need him.”

Harry noticed, however, that her eyes were unusually shiny.

“Come on, let’s go or we’ll be late for PRAT.”

“Oh, joy.” Xu deadpanned as they walked away.

“Professor Lockhart is *not* that bad!” Emma protested. “He’s just not used to teaching yet!”

The three older Slytherins could only sigh and shake their heads.

“Denial.” Draco said. “Sad.”

Herbology class was rather... exciting. The mandrakes, going through their childhood, had absolutely no wish to sit still and remain potted. Twice, Harry’s plant managed to get an arm out of the dirt and attempt to grab the closest thing – once, Harry’s green and silver necktie.

“Little *brats*!!” Blaise snapped in righteous anger, pointing her wand at her cracked pot. The mandrake inside had apparently decided that trying to go out through the top was impossible, and was trying to break its ‘prison’ in pieces. “*Reparo! Reparo!!*”

Finally, they were allowed out. Everyone was rather worn out, and looking forward to dinner. But Harry had agreed to see Hagrid that day. Surprisingly, however, Blaise had caught up to him on his way to the small wooden hut, claiming: “What, he’s *my* friend, too!”

Unsurprisingly, however, Draco refused to go, muttering something about a mutt. He had developed a fair dislike for Fang ever since he had first set foot in the gigantic man’s house. The fact that a pair of his expensive robes still bore some stains of saliva from that day had perhaps not helped.

Harry knocked on the door, although he was sure Hagrid probably wouldn't mind if Harry just opened it and walked in. It was the polite thing to do, and he had been raised to be polite – it was that, or the cupboard. The giant opened the door for them and welcomed them inside with a large, warm, beard-hidden smile.

Hagrid's hut hadn't changed... much. There was no dragon present, as Harry's initial look around the house reported. He felt immensely reassured. An impressively-sized crossbow stood by the door, beside Hagrid's 'magical pink umbrella'. Harry didn't know how an umbrella could have the same focusing power as a wand. However, he knew, from Ollivander, the wand merchant, that Hagrid had been expelled and that his previous wand had been snapped.

"Eh, Blaise! Wasn' expectin' yeh." Hagrid said upon spotting the girl entering his hut. "Good thing I made extras!"

He brandished his secret weapon on a circular metal plate; cookies. Black cookies. Black cookies appropriately called Rock cakes.

"Ehh... I think I'll pass, thanks." Blaise said. "I'm not very hungry... mandrakes and all..."

"Ah, yeh, never liked those things. 'tleast yeh didn't hear one of 'em screamin'." The man gave a shudder, then sat down on a chair beside the only table in the house, while pushing a dead rooster out of the way. "Not a fun thing teh do."

Blaise simply nodded and sat on another chair.

"What did you want to talk about?" Harry asked, imitating his friend.

Hagrid gave Harry a grin. "What, need a reason teh talk teh mister popularity now? Heard yeh were givin' out interviews! I'm kinda jealous I didn't ge' one..."

"N-NO!" Harry protested loudly, before realizing Hagrid had only been joking. "Stupid Lockhart."

"Yeah, sure is a pain, that guy..." Hagrid agreed.

"What was Dumbledore *thinking*?" Blaise added. "If we learn one *bit* of defense against the dark arts from him this year, I'll... eat that rooster raw."

Hagrid snorted and nodded. "I'll take yer word on that."

"What happened to it anyway?" Harry asked, pointing at the fallen fowl.

"Ah, dunno. Found it dead yesterday, still haven't found deh time teh talk 'ta Dumbledore 'bout it." The huge man shrugged. "Busy man, that Dumbledore. 'specially lately. Dun' wanna disturb him jus' fer replacin' a rooster."

"The chamber business?" Blaise asked.

"Yeh, that... dampenin' everythin', stoppin' the story from getting' teh da Daily prophet and start a scandal... while *tryin'* teh figure out who dunnit. Talkin' 'bout that, Harry, I heard it was you."

"Well it wasn't." Harry growled, crossing his arms.

"Ah, I know that." The man replied with a smile. "Jus' lie low and don't get attention teh yerself – I knew yeh can do it if yeh try! The whole thin' should blow over before yeh know it."

Attracting attention was easy, for him. Not attracting it was the challenge, especially when there is, at the same time in the school, Gilderoy Lockhart – always eager to higher his popularity by posing with the boy-who-lived – and Colin Creevey – the groupie. And it was practically impossible when, on the morning of Saturday, a Quidditch match against Gryffindor was scheduled.

Flint's pep-talk had been a short, calm, gentle and encouraging: "Win or die."

Well, in more words... and a bit more aggressive. And perhaps more personalized, which included having Bole and Derrick shoving their Bludgers in Macdonald's – the Gryffindor seeker – and Wood's – the

Gryffindor keeper – faces or else he'd shove their brooms up holes normally used for evacuating waste, Draco and Pucey to fly in team with him or he'd kick them out of the team and down the astronomy tower, a warning not to let anything pass through the hoops – not even air – to Bletchley, along with a threat of not having any air passing through his lungs.

And finally, to Harry:

"If you catch the snitch too early, you're dead. Catch it after MacDonald and you're dead. Don't catch it and you'll *wish* you were dead. Fall off your broom and I'll kill you. Is that clear?"

Honestly, what can you say to that?

The sky was cloudy and the wind was strong. The air felt heavy and smelled of ozone. A storm was coming and everyone knew it. It did nothing to make him less nervous – it wouldn't be the first time he had flown during a storm, but it would be his first actual *match* in one. His role, catching the snitch, would be all the more complicated if it would start to rain. And somehow, he didn't think the snitch would come to him like during his first match ever.

"I will not tolerate any cheating," Madam Hooch was saying to both captains "so make sure your players fly safely and follow the rules!"

Flint was clearly annoyed, but his glaring eyes were staring at Wood, who was staring back in pure hatred.

With an audible sigh of deject, she kicked the box containing the balls open, threw the Quaffle up, then released both Bludgers and the snitch, which vanished immediately. The match was on.

After the first minute of play, it became obvious what the Gryffindors' plan for victory was. It all depended on MacDonald catching the snitch quickly. The three red chasers tried to stop their opponents as much as possible, only attacking when there was an obvious opportunity. Fred and George were duking it out with Derrick

and Bole, preventing both Slytherin beaters from breaking the Gryffindor defense. It was a remarkable example of defensive play...

...but it didn't stop the superiorly-equipped Slytherin team from scoring twice in the first ten minutes.

Lee Jordan was once again up to his biased commenting, while McGonagall barked whenever he got out of line – which was about once every minute. Not once did she really act, though. She wanted the Slytherins to be down as much as everyone in the other houses – with the exception of Hermione, who was calmly reading a book, last time he had seen her in the stands.

"Harry! Look out!!" Derrick called.

ZZZZIIII

The training kicked in and Harry executed a flawless overturn, letting the Bludger fly harmlessly over him. The beater flew over and whacked the offending ball away.

"Thanks." Harry said.

"No problem." The boy said, before frowning. "It's weird though, it just veered out of the way and went straight at—"

VIZZZZZZ

Once again, Harry found himself twisting in mid-air before he could properly realize the danger. The Bludger scratched Harry's arm as it passed. Once again, Derrick sent it away.

"What the..."

The iron ball flew about ten feet, before suddenly veering back and charging at Harry again. This time, Derrick get it a whack in the direction of MacDonald, who stared at it like a deer caught in the headlights... before it went straight back toward Harry.

"Someone rigged this thing!!" Derrick grunted, whacking it.

'Why me?!" Harry wondered, flying forward, searching for the snitch. A sudden cold wetness on his hands betrayed the oncoming rain. The storm was about to fall any minute now.

"Bell throws and... block from Bletchley, it was close, though. Better luck next time. Pass to Flint, to Malfoy, back at Flint, Pucey, intercepted by Johnson... Bludger in the face, ouch, Malfoy takes the Quaffle. He flies, flies... come on, Wood! He thr—feints, Pass to Pucey and score!! Damn! Fourty to ten, Slytherin."

Harry smirked at Draco's maneuver. Even if he hadn't seen it, he knew his friend was doing well. Using the fact that everyone thought he had got on the team because he was friend with the seeker and because his father had given the team new brooms, he made the competition believe he was a poor player during the whole time, only showing he was good when it counted.

VIZZZZZZZZ

This time, Harry veered to the left and the ball flicked his ear as it went, nearly knocking his glasses off.

'That darn ball's been tempered.' Harry frowned, looking at the Bludger. Then, looking at MacDonald, he smirked. Maybe he could turn this to his advantage.

Pointing himself directly at the bigger seeker, who was holding onto his broom for dear life, stuck in a wind pocket, Harry pushed his broom at full speed. The Gryffindor quickly spotted him and started to look around him, thinking Harry had seen the Snitch.

VVVVVIIIIIIII

Harry could hear the Bludger accelerate behind him, trying to keep up. He smirked. So far, so good.

MacDonald had guessed incorrectly that Harry wanted to ram into him and take him out of the game. Quickly, he... did nothing but stare, a bit like a bunny under a large, large, falling rock.

At the last second, Harry twisted upside-down and barely avoided colliding his broom with the other seeker's. Twisting himself upwards again, he gave a look behind...

"OUCH! MacDonald's been hit, hard! He's falling... but who... What the... that Bludger is tailing Potter! Wood calls for a time-out, accorded. Somebody better check that Bludger before we get a boy-who-got-killed!"

The Slytherin reassembled in the air. Harry's eyes searching the sky the whole time, while the rigged Bludger was held back by both Slytherin beaters. By now, it was pouring. The rumbling of thunder shook the wooden stadium ominously. Harry supposed there were protection wards against the weather in the stands, since it wouldn't be very safe to sit on elevated seats during a thunderstorm.

"That was a nice move, Potter." Flint congratulated. "The Gryffindors are playing it defensive, so unless we take out MacDonald, they still have a chance to win. Malfoy, that was a nice feint, but you won't get Wood twice with that trick, so stop trying."

The platinum-haired boy nodded.

"Derrick, keep protecting Potter—"

"I won't be able to see the snitch if he keep hanging around me." Harry interrupted, removing his drenched glasses and wiping them on his equally drenched robes. "I can hardly see as it is."

"...very well. Potter, you can catch the snitch. We'll catch something and miss practices if the game doesn't end. Derrick, Bole, you both try to take down MacDonald, and Wood when we're about to score. I want that seeker out of the sky—"

"MacDonald is up!" Lee Jordan cheered over Flint's voice. "He's not out of the game!"

"Yet." Bole added with a smirk, holding the rogue Bludger on himself. The ball apparently struggled at his captor, still trying to ram into Harry.

"Can someone do something about my glasses?" Harry asked, frowning. "I can't see a thing with them, and even less without them."

"Here." Pucey said, taking out his wand and tapping it on the seeker's glasses. "*Impervius.*"

The water on the glasses suddenly vanished with a puff of vapor that slid down and fell to the ground in a couple of drops. Drops of rain now magically twisted out of the way, as if a bubble of wind protected his glasses.

"Thanks." Harry said, putting them on.

Hooch blew her whistle and the match was on again. Bole let go of the Bludger and gave it a powerful whack in the opposite direction while Harry flew away, eyes darting everywhere, hoping to find the golden ball.

VIZZ

While dodging that bloody rigged Bludger.

For the first time in his life, Harry felt grateful for the hard training Flint had pushed them through. At the smallest sound of the Bludger, his body moved practically on its own, avoiding the iron ball – though, twice, it hadn't moved correctly and he found himself still getting hit, but not nearly as badly as he would have, normally.

Twice, he attempted to take out MacDonald in the same way as he had before. However, the Gryffindor Seeker was now wary of his tricks. The technique, however, worked wonders on the chasers, forcing them to duck out of the way from the barging Bludger.

Finally, Harry spotted the Snitch, fluttering about the Gryffindor goals. Eager to end the match, Harry turned and pointed himself at it...

VIIII* *CRACK

Only to recoil in pain as the Bludger rammed directly on the side of his ribs. He felt two of them crack from the impact. Partially blinded by the pain, he forced the broom to accelerate before he lost track of the

snitch. He gave a look behind him and saw MacDonald had also spotted it and was flying as fast as his Cleansweep 7 could go.

The Bludger was also coming for a second blow. Smirking a bit, Harry veered across the path of MacDonald. Just as he had planned, the Bludger followed, ramming against the inferior broom's tail twigs, sending it into a wild spin. Harry turned back to the snitch, which had barely changed location since. Stretching his arm, his leaned to catch it...

...his hand closed around the small golden ball and the crowd went wild.

"Harry Potter catches the Snitch!" Lee Jordan shouted, sounding rather disappointed. "But only thanks to that rigged Blud—LOOK OUT!!"

Harry blinked, looked behind him...

WHAM

He woke up on something soft. It wasn't a mattress, however, since it was wet. The rain was still falling on his face.

Sand

He was laying down on the sand, just below the goalposts.

Ah. That's where he was. Now, how was he?

As he concentrated, one word came to his mind.

"Ow."

His body felt like it was broken, all over. It hurt to breathe, it hurt to move, even twitch. The beating of his heart was painful; never mind thinking. He felt like one giant cracked bone.

"He's awake!" A voice said.

"Out of the way, please, let me through..." He heard what was unmistakably Lockhart's voice say "Well, don't you see he's hurt? I can help him, please get out of my way—"

"Move." A sharper voice ordered. He recognized Snape, almost immediately.

He felt someone touch him and groaned as intense pain coursed through him again. Weakened, tired, in pain, Harry mercifully fell unconscious.

When he woke up, he felt much, much better, although extremely fuzzy and quite unable to move. His thoughts were halfway coherent, as if he was extremely tired, or under the effect of a sleeping draught. He could feel something in his hand. Something alive. With great difficulty, he looked down and saw Blaise, sleeping soundly, her head on the mattress, her hair a mess and spread all over the white drape. Her hand was holding his.

Smiling at his best friend, he prepared to give in to the urge to sleep when the door of the infirmary opened. Struggling to keep his eyes open, Harry looked as Dumbledore, wearing a night robe and a long hat, walked in, wand in hand, a statue floating behind him.

Behind him, the tiny form of Flitwick walked in. Harry heard him sniffing sadly.

"Get Poppy, Filius." Dumbledore whispered, floating the statue down on a bed.

The teacher nodded and walked into the nurse's office.

"Whut'z gwin' on...?" Blaise mumbled, waking up. Harry shushed her and pointed at the statue, using a lot of his energy in the move.

The girl gasped in horror, but her hands blocked her mouth before it came out.

"What happened?" Madam Pomfresh asked, walking out of her room.

"A new attack." The headmaster said ominously. "He was found near the Ravenclaw common room. There was a bunch of flowers on the floor nearby. I believe he wanted to apologize to his ex-girlfriend."

Curious, Blaise bent around the curtains and took a peek. This time, she didn't manage to block her gasp.

"Percy?!" she gasped.

"When a wizard goes over ter the Dark Side, there's nothin' and no one that matters to 'em anymore."

Rubeus Hagrid

Chapter 10: The grey-paged book

When Harry woke up, he found himself staring at the ceiling of the infirmary room. By now, it was a rather familiar ceiling. He *had* been in this room more times than he cared to remember.

Remember

“Percy!” he gasped, sitting up. All at once, a powerful headache assaulted him, reminding him that, perhaps, moving quickly after taking a fifty feet drop was *not* a good idea. Blindly, he grabbed for his glasses and put them on his nose.

On a bed not too far away, Percy Weasley was laying down, frozen still, like a statue. His left hand was clenched around nothing, his face,

unlike Norris, was one out outrage and surprise. He was half-covered by the drape – although it was a rather futile gesture, considering he wouldn't feel the cold anyhow – and his glasses were lying on the bedside table.

Harry sighed. As much as he disliked the prefect, he hadn't wished for anything like *this* to happen to him.

"Ah, Mister Potter. Finally awake, I see." Madam Pomfresh said, holding a tray of food. "You are completely healed. One of your ribs pierced your lungs, so take it easy for the next three days and you should be all right."

"umm... what happened to the Bludger? Why was it acting like that?" Harry asked, puzzled.

"The headmaster couldn't find anything odd about it, oddly enough." The nurse replied, depositing the tray near Harry. "Eat then leave."

Harry nodded and looked around. "Um... Was Blaise here?"

"Miss Zabini? Yes. She categorically refused to leave your side, until Mr Weasley came in. By now, I believe most of Slytherin should know the news."

"He's... all right, right? Just petrified..."

"Yes." The woman gave him a look. "Eat."

Quickly, he obeyed. As soon as the first bite was swallowed, he realized exactly how hungry he was. The last bit of food he had eaten had been what little he had been able to swallow during the breakfast, the day before. Before he knew it, he had finished and was asking for seconds.

The door of the infirmary suddenly opened. Hoping that, perhaps, it was Blaise or Draco, Harry looked up...

...it wasn't them.

Three students entered the room. All three were tall, all three were male, and all three had red hair and freckles. All three were also related to the newest victim. They were Ron, Fred and George Weasley.

"Merlin... Percy!" Ron gasped as soon as he entered.

The twins stayed silent, but their expressions of horror revealed their feelings better than words ever could.

Behind them, in the doorway, McGonagall stared, mouth open. Apparently, she couldn't believe it either.

The three brothers went to the prefect's sides, but stayed silent. Harry understood perfectly. He could only see one of the twins' faces – there was still no way for him to discern them – but the only expression there was shock and a good dose of remorse, as if he was remembering all the pranks he had pulled on his older brother.

"Professor McGonagall, if you'd please move out of the way," A voice said from outside the infirmary. He recognized that voice. It was Professor Snape.

The elderly woman quickly realized she was blocking the path and swiftly moved out of the way, allowing another red-head inside, followed by her head of house.

Seeing Ginny's horrified face was ten times harder than her brothers, for Harry. She let out a shrill shriek and dashed to his side.

"What are *you* doing here?" he heard Ron hiss.

"He's *my* brother, too!" She replied loudly, before turning to the petrified one. "..."

The twins suddenly got up.

"We'll catch whoever's doing this." The one he could see said, determination on his face.

"And they'll pay for messing with *this* family." The other one agreed with a nod.

In his bed, Harry nodded as well, seeing Ginny sob silently. He still owed the Weasleys, and Ginny was his friend.

'I'll catch whoever it is.' He vowed. 'And I'll make *damn* sure he's stopped.'

His breakfast ended, Harry got up and swiftly walked out of the room, ignoring the glare Ron shot at him and barely avoiding running into a worried-looking fifth year Ravenclaw Prefect, the same one who had slapped Percy before. As he walked down the multiple stairways of Hogwarts, he felt rather than heard the rumor – Percy had been attacked. Percy Weasley, a prefect, pure-blood from a Muggle-loving family, had been attacked. That was the fact. The result of the attack, however, was what the rumors were all about. Some said he was dead, others, right, said he was petrified, like Norris. A small minority hoped that Percy had defeated the monster and was simply in the infirmary to recover from the ordeal.

What was obvious was the resulting panic. Percy Weasley had been a pure-blood. Public opinion decided it was because his family was pro-Muggle. And so, everyone, even pure-bloods, suddenly became especially jumpy.

The Slytherin common room was in an uproar. The good news just kept on coming – Their spectacular, and rather humiliating, flat-out victory against the Gryffindor Quidditch team (280-10, he heard), and now, the petrification of the school's most hated Gryffindor Prefect. The many, many pieces of trash littering the floor proved that the dungeons had been lively from a party.

However, he couldn't find his friends. Xu and Emma were sitting on their usual sofa, doing their homework.

“Oh, hello, Harry.” Xu said, looking up from the parchment page one second, before returning to it, her thin eyes squinting further, as if she was reading something very hard to understand. Harry replied with a nod.

“Where are Draco and Blaise?” He asked.

“They left a while ago, going to see that Muggle-born girl... erm...”

“Heh-mao-nee.” Xu supplied, not looking up.

“Right.” Emma said, thanking the other girl. “Apparently, they didn’t think you’d be up so soon... you took quite a fall.”

“Good thing *Benlaoshi* no touch you, would make it worse.”

“*Bunlaoshi?*” Harry asked, blinking and mispronouncing.

“Her nickname for Professor Lockhart.” Emma said, frowning. “She refuses to say what it means, though.”

From Xu’s sadistic and satisfied smirk, he guessed it was nothing pleasant.

Finding their location was a simple matter. Where else would the three Slytherins go and meet their Gryffindor friend than in “their” empty classroom, where they had taken to meeting each other during the previous year – usually to discuss the stone, Quirrell or, in Blaise’s case, to eat tons of candy.

He was right. The brass door opened on the familiar, well-lit, small room on the third floor, near the charms classrooms. Inside, he saw Draco, sprawled on a chair, looking rather bored, Blaise, wrestling a red Bertie Bott’s bean from Ginny, and a rather annoyed Hermione, who was shuffling through an exemplary of *Hogwarts, a History*.

To his surprise, Ginny didn’t look all that sad. However, when he looked for a little longer, he definitely saw that her eyes didn’t have

that... glittering quality to them, as if she was shielding her feelings away.

"Hey Harry!" Draco called, smirking. "Want to play Chess?"

Knowing that agreeing to *that* was as intelligent as switching OWL results with Crabbe or Goyle, he politely refused with a: "Hell no."

"Why does *everyone* say that?" Draco wasn't whining. After all, Malfoys don't whine. They complain, instead. "Is it because I'm the uncontested *king* of chess?"

"Ron is as good as you are." Hermione flatly noted, her nose still in the book.

"I told you, it was a lucky break! A fluke!" he vehemently protested.

With a snort and a shake of his head, Harry sat down on a desk between Draco and Blaise, who had successfully pulled the red bean out of the younger yet taller girl's grasp and quickly threw it in her mouth, only to gag and spit it across the room.

"Blood! Ugh!"

"Thanks, then." Ginny said with a smirk.

"Grr, there's *NOTHING* in this!!" Hermione growled, slamming the book shut and shoving it on the nearest desk.

"Hey, careful!" Draco yelped, grabbing the book. "That thing costs a lot, you know!"

"Oh, I'm sure your finances are devastated." She retorted flatly, sulking. "But there's nothing in it that I don't already know..."

"About what?"

"The legend of the chamber of secrets." Hermione said. "Professor Binns told us a bit about it, how the heir opens the room and uses the monster in it to kill off those of Muggle blood, but that's *all* it says in it!"

Blaise turned to Draco, giving him a flat look. “Wasn’t it ‘an old legend, passed on only among the highest-ranked, strictly-Slytherin families’?”

Draco shrugged. “Hey, all it takes is one tell-tale...”

Ignoring them, Harry asked Hermione: “What were you looking for, then?”

“*Anything!*” The girl replied. “And I *still* can’t believe *Hogwarts, a History* doesn’t have *anything* about it... it’s the most complete resource on anything School-related. It’s supposed to tell *everything*.”

“Well, if nobody found anything *else* than that about the legend, except the heir,” Ginny calmly said, her voice softer than usual, “it’s normal that it only has that much information in it, isn’t it? It’s not an all-knowing book.”

“Or a clair Bible.” Draco added.

Hermione sighed. “You’re right. But... I mean... it’s disappointing.”

“Ah, yes. Our resident bookworm, deceived by her one, true love...” The platinum-haired boy said with a fake swoon, hugging *Hogwarts, a History* tightly.

“Draco, did I ever tell you you’re an insufferable prat?”

“I don’t believe I’ve had that honor yet,” Draco replied honestly in an exaggerated Elizabethan accent, “but I thank you, bushy-haired lady, and add that you, at times, are one yourself.”

“Git.”

Few days passed calmly. Ginny, with the help of Emma and Xu, seemed to come out of it. Pretty soon, Harry saw her grin, while writing in that little black book he knew was her diary.

The shock of the attack settled and suspicious had began to arise. The fact that Harry had, once again, been alone at the time of the attack – it wasn't known Blaise had been with him – he was once again pointed at. But very few agreed, this time. After all, he had received, as far as the rumor mill was concerned, a broken rib, perforated lung, broken arm – some even said it had become infected and had been amputated and grown back magically – and, to the limit, a concussion and broken skull. Those few who had claimed he was in a coma had taken rather sheepish looks when he had walked in front of them, though.

That lifted the ridiculous theory that there was a Harry Potter impersonator in school. Nobody believed *that* one.

As for Hermione, she had simply given up on finding information on the Chamber itself. Instead, she searched the library for anything petrification-related, hoping to get a clue on who was the heir through *how* he had managed to petrify people. However, even with Harry and Draco helping – Blaise had steadfastly refused, saying she had spent enough time ‘booking around’ last year – they didn’t manage to find anything. Hermione was livid.

“There *has* to be *something*!!” She declared with the same tone of voice as someone holding on a belief like a lifeline.

“Well, if there’s information about this *anywhere*, it’s in there.” Draco said, pointing a the entrance to the restricted section. “And there’s no way Pince will let us through, even with a word from the teachers. Besides, we need to know *exactly* what we want.”

“And we don’t.” Harry said.

“Unless there’s a book called: ‘Petrification for dummies’, I think not.” The boy replied.

The solution was easily found. It was located in Harry’s trunk, between his Weasley sweater and a pair of clean robes. His invisibility cloak.

The plan was simple and riskless – at least, for Draco and Blaise.

Harry would go in alone, grab the first book on petrification he could find then run back to the common room. When he tried to ask why he was going alone, he received this for an answer:

"It's stealthier to go alone. And if we were caught red-handed, it would look *very* bad, especially lately."

"Besides, you're not hoping a *lady* like *me* to risk her schooling, right?"

Dejectedly, wondering, for the thousandth time, exactly *why* he was doing this, Harry silently pushed the doors of the library open. Madam Pince was asleep, in her office. He knew, however, that the sound insulation was *very* bad – from less fortunate Slytherins' stories.

He made it in the restricted section without any trouble. It was just as he remembered it, from last year. Eerie, dark, filled with soft, undecipherable whispers. Harry half expected a mist to form around him. Pulling his wits around him, he scouted around for his goal.

'Petrification has to be in the dark magic section.' He thought, looking at the plates. Finding the right row near the deepest end of the section, he began to search for anything petrification-related.

Ok. Insert a pause, here.

Harry Potter is brave. Yes. He is also powerful, capable of casting a spell most wizards are unable to do at the tender age of 13. However, he *does* have failings. He is very stubborn, quite reckless and, most of all, has an insatiable curiosity.

After all, who was it that looked into Dumbledore's Pensieve, even though he *knew* touching anything magical without knowing what it is was rather foolish?

[Censored for non-OotP readers] And who is it that, rather recklessly, took another look into -----'s Pensieve, even though he *perfectly knew* what it was, and how ----- would react?

Ok. Unpause. I just wanted to clear this up.

The books were all mostly unattractive; either because they were huge, either because they had odd, weird or creepy titles, or because the books themselves were rather weird or creepy. The titles varied between: '10 easy steps to get rid of your neighbor' to 'the ten most painful tortures'. Surely both of those were best sellers, but not quite what he was looking for. He finally stopped in front of a large dark purple book.

The dark magic lexicon

'...Professor Snape said petrification was of the most advanced dark magic...' Harry thought. 'I guess there might be something in this...'

After carefully slipping the dusty book out of the way, Harry was rather surprised to see it didn't look nearly as creepy as the other books in the section. Its pages were grey, but didn't look old. Knowing the way the magical world worked, he supposed the pages had been *made* grey.

Then, he opened it.

The first page was blank.

The second page as well.

The third page didn't want to turn.

Blinking, Harry shrugged. 'Pince probably sealed it because it's dangerous.' He thought, closing it and slipping it back to where it was. After being rid of the book, he got up again and started to search for anything on petrification...

Swooop

Quidditch training kicked in as he heard something coming at him quickly. Unconsciously, he twisted to the side, hitting his forehead on a bookshelf. Said bookshelf broke in a sinister cracking and all the books it held stumbled to the ground, some of them opening. Unfortunately, his old friend from last year, the screaming book, opened as well.

Cursing under his breath, Harry looked at what had caused him to dodge so disastrously.

The grey-paged book was hovering before him, open on the first page. Where there was nothing but grey before, an eerie, blood red writing was now scribbled across the page.

Do not try to get rid of me, Harry Potter

“What in the name of Merlin is going on in here?!” He heard Pince ask as she quickly walked in the restricted section.

Quickly deciding leaving a book with his name written in it in the dark arts area of the restricted section was a “capital B” *Bad* idea. Harry caught it from mid-air, snuffed it in his backpack and quickly left, careful not to bother any closed books and not to step on the open ones – especially not that menacing one with the fangs.

Barely avoiding colliding into Pince, Harry silently ran away. Luckily, Pince had left the chain unhooked and the way for his exit wide and clear.

He managed to get in the Slytherin common room, out of breath. Draco and Blaise had both decided to make it as un-suspicious as possible and had said they wouldn’t wait for him.

Harry was grateful, because it let him look at the grey-paged book he had snatched away.

Angrily, he threw his backpack down on his usual seat, opened it and pulled the offending book out. Opening it at the first page, where the message had disappeared, Harry glared.

"Do you have any idea how much trouble you could have got me through?!"

A second after the last word was said, another message wrote itself in the same, blood-red ink.

Do write in me, it will look less suspicious, and will not make you look like you are losing it. And as for getting you into trouble, I apologize. I have spent a long time in that damned Library, and desperately wanted to get out. You were my first opportunity in fifty-three years.

'I managed to get the only possessed book that's polite.' Harry thought wryly. Taking a quill and inkpot from his backpack, he wrote back.

Sorry, it's the first time I talk to a talking book.

The answer came a few seconds later.

I see. Is there anything you're looking for?

Quickly, Harry's quill was sent to work again.

I'm looking for information on Petrification curses.

There is no petrification curse that I know of. There is, however, a petrification ritual, and a blood-freezing curse that has about the same effect, minus the life-preserving quality of petrification.

The words were written, but it didn't stop Harry from reading the tone as rather cold-hearted. They were cold, technical and quite emotionless, as if it didn't care about the possible victim.

'It's a book.' He reminded himself. 'Of course it doesn't care.' Choosing the most likely one in the list, he wrote again:

I'd like to know about the ritual, if it's possible.

Very Well. Please remove your hands from me.

Obeying quickly, Harry wasn't all that surprised to see a final message flash before his eyes—

Thank you

--before the pages suddenly whipped open, as if someone was blowing air on them. They stopped on a full page, this time. The magic spell itself was written in an odd manner, as if it was some kind of mix between a potion and a charm.

Petrification ritual

Difficulty level: High

Time required in preparation: six months

Effect: Freezes the selected victim into stone. As stone is eternal, yet incapable of thought, the petrified person will not change, nor be able to act in any way. Waking up from the ritual effect – which can only be done through the effect of a mandrake draught or a counter-ritual – feels like waking up from a long sleep. The victim has no memories of the petrified time.

Required ingredients:

Harry didn't read any further. It wasn't possibly that. The preparation time was much, much too long for the seemingly spontaneous attacks. Plus, the image drawn beside the text showed someone standing over someone else, who was laying down in a blood red devil's star pattern, with candles on each point. It looked like stuff that might be taken from an old, clichéd movie.

'Apparently, those movies are accurate.'

However, as accurate as they were, there was no sign of any drawings or candle wax on the floor during either of the attacks.

The pages suddenly twitched and Harry found himself pulling his hands out quickly, a second before the book turned itself back to page one.

Did you find what you were looking for?

Taking his quill, he wrote one word: *No*.

Ah, then I am sorry I could not help. The book replied. **I believe it is late. You should go to sleep.**

Harry let out a yawn and closed the book. It was right. His watch told him it was some time after midnight, impossible to tell in the dim light – and his lack of attention due to drowsiness. In his tired state, he did not notice the book floating back into his backpack, carrying his invisibility cloak along with the inkpot and quill, nor the backpack following him up the stairs. When he lay down on the bed, barely avoiding crushing Nemesis in the process, his mind was already sleeping. Hence, he did not notice the backpack laying itself down by his bed, on his unlocked trunk.

"You think the monster knows how to duel?"

Ron Weasley, Harry Potter et la Chambre des Secrets, page 202

Chapter 11: Snake charmer

"Harry, come on, you lot! Wake up; we're going to be late!"

"Leemmee 'lone..."

Harry Potter was not normally a late-riser. Years and years of preparing the Dursleys' breakfasts had drilled into him the painless goodness of waking early. However, staying up all night to walk around the library's restricted section made waking 'early' a relative thing.

Gingerly, he sat up, glaring at a grinning Draco from half-lidded eyes. "Whudyuu wan?" He asked, yawning.

"Blaise and I've been waiting for you to wake up for an hour, now... classes are about to start!"

"And you didn't wake me up?!" Harry shrieked, standing up. He hadn't undressed himself before going to sleep, and his robes were rather disheveled for it.

"We tried to," Blaise said, much to his surprise. What was *she* doing in the *Boys'* dorms?! "but Nemesis wouldn't let us."

"Is it just me, or is your snake getting bigger?" Draco asked, looking at the dark-scaled reptile, which was currently coiled around the bedposts, his head hanging from above.

Harry had to agree with him, though. Nemesis, when Harry had... erm... *borrowed* him, had been a little under two feet long, and rather thin. Now, however, he was probably a bit under four, and carrying his weight had begun to become a problem. He knew, from the way he had attacked Quirrell the previous year, that he was a constrictor snake, the kind that strangles their victims before swallowing whole. However, until now, he had never taken time to wonder exactly what kind he was, or how long he'd get.

"Don't worry about him, he's harmless." 'Almost.' Harry said, adding the last part mentally.

"Hmm." Neither of his friends looked certain of his claim. Dismissing it, Harry picked up his backpack and, stuffing the cloak back in his trunk, headed out.

"So, did you find anything?" Blaise asked.

'Yeah, I found a *polite* talking book on dark arts that doesn't want to leave me alone.' He thought wryly, while replying "No, not really."

"Pince was a mess, this morning... did she find you?" Draco added.

"Almost. One of the bookshelves wasn't too solid, it snapped when I put my hand on it. Made a ruckus, you wouldn't believe. I was lucky to make it out of there in one piece."

Fortunately, they started the day with History of Magic. Harry chose a seat in the back, behind Crabbe and Goyle, so he could catch up on his sleep. However, as he pulled out *A history of magic* by Bathilda Bagshot, Harry saw something he had obviously forgot to remove the previous day.

The dark magic lexicon

The damned, stubborn, self-thinking (and polite!!) talking book was still there.

Come to think about it, he hadn't brought his backpack up with him, the previous night, either.

Curious, Harry looked around him. Nobody was looking. Everyone was either dozing off or already sound asleep. Slowly, he opened the book. The first page was now bearing few words, written in ink he recognized as his:

Property of Harry Potter

Quickly, Harry whipped out his quill and inkpot and wrote furiously

What do you think you're doing?! If someone reads this

He didn't get to write any further before the book replied. It's ink, this time, was not the eerie blood red it had picked yesterday. Instead, dark green ink appeared.

If anyone but you look at me without being told what I am, they will believe I am the most likely book you could be holding at that time. Most of them believe you are currently reading a past entry in your diary.

With an inaudible sigh of relief, Harry lifted the book and put it on his desk. If that was the case, then it was rather futile to hide it. He noticed the first two messages had vanished and another was replacing them.

I would also appreciate if you wrote on my second page, thank you. Call me sentimental, but it does not feel right to have ink on my first page.

‘...sentimental. Feel right. *You’re a book!!*’ Harry was tempted to remind it, but didn’t.

He turned the page. Another message appeared.

Thank you.

Blinking, still not used to being *thanked* by a *book*, Harry wrote hesitantly: *No problem*.

There was few seconds of... silence would not be the proper term, but... erm... of non-conversation, during which Harry listened absentmindedly to Binns’ droning.

“...Wenlock was born in 1202. In 1217, she received an award for her work in Arithmancy, being the only witch ever to have received over 150% in the fifth year examinations, which are now called the Ordinary Wizarding Levels, or OWLs, in Arithmancy. Two years later, she received seven NEWTs. At Twenty-one years of age, she wrote a theory on the magical properties of the number seven. She died at 83 years of age in 1285, leaving behind seven children, the oldest being fourty-three years old at the time of her death.”

While anyone knowing this from the drop of a hat would usually be worthy of some kind of award, the way Binns said it was about as exciting as watching a snail race, and the only possible award Harry could think would fit the ghost was the “Winter bear” award, for making people fall into a state of hibernation at each of his classes.

Yawning, he gave a look back at the grey pages of the book, only to see it had written another message.

Would you like something to pass the time?

Harry had to read that line twice before considering the offer. The book treated of dark magic. It was rather obviously sentient, and, as

far as he knew, could have bad intentions. Carefully, Harry wrote back:

Depends what it is.

Please remove your hands from my pages. Have no worry, I will be quiet.

Obeying, Harry watched as the book turned only two pages and stilled. Curious, he read on.

Index

Please underline your choice. The book will automatically turn to the selected subject. Subject 1 will have more choices as the reader progresses ahead.

1. Black magic lessons

a): Black magic theory

2. Black magic spells

Search for spell (Write in the space):

Quickly, Harry shut the book, horrified. It wanted him to learn its spells. It wanted him to learn black magic; to become a dark wizard, like Voldemort.

‘Hell no.’ Harry decided, stuffing the book in his backpack.

Days crawled away. Fortunately, there seemed to be some kind of lull after the second attack. However, that didn’t stop the list of students going off during the Christmas vacation to grow to large proportions. Harry, after signing his name in the list of those who desired to stay, noted that Blaise, the remaining Weasley family and Xu Chang were

staying. However, to his surprise, he read the name of Draco Malfoy. When Harry asked his friend about it, he just replied:

“Father wants me to stay and write anything odd happening in the school.” The boy replied with a shrug. “Personally, I don’t know which Christmas I’d rather have: With my family and a bunch of guests, getting tons and presents and being able to use my own room, or stuck at Hogwarts with friendly company and as many Weasleys as I want to bother. No offense, Ginny.”

“None taken.” Ginny replied. “And I get the feeling you won’t be the only one bothering my brothers.”

“Why?” Emma asked. She was going away, during the Christmas break. Her foster family, a pair of old, rich and pure-blooded aristocrats, absolutely *refused* to let her have a, as they called it, “Commoner’s Christmas day”.

“Remember what Xu asked, about what Ron was afraid of? I get the feeling we’re going to see a lot of spiders around, lately.” Ginny’s smirk could only be referred to as sadistic, something she seemed to have perfected down to an art already.

“Duel club?” Blaise read on a billboard, about a week later. A large crowd had amassed in front of it. A list underneath, written on an obviously magical piece of parchment which rolled the names upwards every time another was written – received the interested students’ names.

“Right. Like the monster of Slytherin is the kind of thing that will let you duel it.” Blaise said flatly. “That idea is so useless.”

“Why? Are you messing up?” Draco asked with a smirk.

“I’m more afraid of making the *rest* of you look stupid.” Blaise replied, grinning. “My mum taught me some dueling tricks this summer, after learning what happened last year and who I hang around with.”

Harry blinked and looked at Blaise. He knew Mrs. Zabini pretty well, and knew her philosophy about rules were “Rules be damned, do what you feel is right” or something along the lines of that. She also had heard about some of their adventures from Blaise, he was sure. However, he doubted she thought being around him was dangerous enough for her to receive rather illegal summer Dueling lessons.

He gave a look at Draco. Perhaps it was to protect Blaise, if *he* wanted to try something. After all, she despised Lucius Malfoy, from what he had seen back at Flourish and Blotts.

However, thinking over it again, he decided he didn’t agree with Blaise. So, perhaps it wouldn’t be useful against the monster of Slytherin, but, assuming he survived this year, he was on top of Voldemort’s hit list. Granted, dueling against the most powerful dark lord in a century was a *bit* of a crazy and foolish idea but it would help to have few notions, if only to give him some time to run for his life.

“I’m entering.” Harry said. “It’s going to be interesting.”

And interesting it was. Few days later, the ‘first’ duel club meeting took place. At least fifty students had joined, all massed up in the same room. If all those people started to duel, the ensuing chaos would surely make even Peeves pale in jealousy. Harry began to fear that the whole thing might end up flopping spectacularly. Blaise and Draco, who had both finally decided to come with Harry, if only for the chance to see it, shared his opinion.

“I wonder who’s teaching us...” Emma, who, along with Ginny and Xu, had signed up, wondered out loud.

“I hope it’s not Lockhart.” Draco said. “If it’s Lockhart, I’m breaking the window and jumping out.” His thumb pointed a nearby window, out of which a spectacular scenery could be seen. They were, after all, on the sixth floor.

The doors suddenly opened and Gilderoy “10.0 watts” Lockhart strode in, dressed in flashy purple robes. Standing behind him, looking rather sour, Professor Snape walked in and, although he was

dressed in plain black, made much more of a scene, simply from the dramatic cape-flaring effect he seemed to have down so well.

"Welcome, everyone!" the blonde said cheerfully, obviously oblivious to the danger. "I am Professor Lockhart..."

'Really?' Harry thought sarcastically. He was sure his thoughts were similar to those of the students around him.

Blaise gave Draco an amused look.

"Why aren't you a bloody spot on the Hogwarts grounds, yet?"

The boy shot her a glare.

"Maybe he's just there for the presentation. There's no way Dumbledore would allow *him* to show us how to duel, unless he wants us all to be incompetent gits."

"Don't be so negative," Emma protested. "I'm sure we'll learn something interesting!"

"Like how to look like idiot with dig..dign..." Xu attempted, frowning as she couldn't find the right word.

"Dignity?" Ginny supplied.

"That." The Chinese girl agreed.

"We might not even learn that, he'd have to have dignity himself." Harry noted absentmindedly, causing snorts and stifled giggles around him.

"Shh!!" Hermione, who had also decided to come, shushed, attempting to listen to the professor, a rosy blush appearing on her face when his eyes turned toward her, if only for a second. Harry felt ill.

"I present you, my assistant: Professor Snape." He said, grinning, ignoring the potion master's death glare at being called an 'Assistant'

of Lockhart's. "He has told me he has a few notions of dueling and has accepted of being my partner in a little demonstration."

"Probably just so Snape could hex him." Draco said. Harry snorted.

"I don't know which one I want to die the most." Blaise noted flatly. Both adults presenting were her least favorite teachers.

"Lockhart." Draco, Xu, Harry and Ginny chorused.

"Don't worry," Lockhart continued. "There's still going to be enough of your professor left to teach you potions when I'm through with him."

"The question is if we're going to have a Defense against the dark arts teacher." Draco noted with a look at Snape, whose glare had started throwing daggers, broadswords, spiked steel flails and man-cleaving axes at the blonde.

"Reckon Dumbledore's good enough to find another one in the middle of the year?" Goyle asked to Crabbe, smirking.

"Probably not." The other slow boy replied.

Harry stifled a laugh. If even *those* two could see it, it *had* to be very obvious.

Emma and Hermione huffed loudly in a nearly identical manner.

"Now, Professor Snape and I will demonstrate the basic dueling stances. Professor..."

Professor Snape obviously knew what he was doing, going into position. Harry noticed Blaise imitating him; she knew it as well. A look at Lockhart was enough to nearly send him into hysterics, however. The blonde was imitating the black-haired teacher's stance rather sloppily.

"Ah, yes. I see. Your technique is excellent, Professor." Lockhart said, as if he was the one in charge – which he obviously wasn't. Snape's

sneer deepened, down to the levels he reserved only for Blaise. Harry almost felt a long-range missile fall out of his teacher's dark eyes. Oblivious, the blonde continued, "How about we take it up a notch?"

"Does he really want to die?" Draco asked.

"Weren't you supposed to jump out the window?" Blaise asked again.

"There's no way I'm missing this." The boy retorted, eyes glittering in anticipation of what Professor Snape would do to Lockhart. Harry had to agree with the sentiment.

Professor Snape seemed to agree as well. With a sinister grin, he lifted his wand and barked out "*Expelliarmus!*"

A ray of bright red light shot out of his wand like a gunshot, ramming directly in Lockhart, who was doing a perfect expression of a deer caught in the headlights. That is, before he was sent flying against the wall, from where he fell into a sprawled heap. His wand, however, flew in the opposite direction and clattered on the floor near one of those goofy Gryffindor girls. Hermione and many girls shrieked and wondered if he was hurt, while the boys and most of the Slytherin girls – minus Emma, Pansy and Millicent – cheered loudly.

Disheveled, his hair a mess, Lockhart got back up and climbed back on the stage, receiving his wand back with a grateful smile at the girl, who, Harry noticed rather sickly, swooned. Composing himself, he gave a large smile.

"Ah yes, that was a disarming charm. As you could see, I lost my wand. Excellent idea, showing them that, Severus, although I could see it coming from miles away."

The satisfied smirk that was on Snape's face turned into an angry sneer. Harry almost called for an encore.

Lockhart seemed to finally notice how angry his colleague was, for he turned to the students. "Well, now it's your turn! Everyone, pair up!"

Harry and Blaise were about to team up but Snape put a hand on Blaise's shoulder. "Miss Zabini, I don't believe you've got nearly the potential to face Mister Potter in duel. Mister Malfoy, team with Potter. Here is someone more to your level, Zabini."

And Blaise was sent against Longbottom. Pissed off, she gave him an angry growl. The overweight boy turned white as a sheet.

"Now, on the count of three, disarm your opponent. One, two—"

"*Expelliarmus!*!" Both Harry and Draco chorused, along with Blaise and Emma. Hermione, who was paired with her, was caught off guard and both she and Longbottom were sent flying. The two boys' spells collided against each other and deviated, hitting two other people, who both got thrown off their feet.

Everyone else took this as their signal and began dueling... and not just disarming.

"*Tarantallegra!*" "*Rictusempera!*"

The spells – and people – went flying everywhere as people dodged or were hit. Harry gasped and fell to the floor when a jelly-leg hex connected against his shoulder.

He noticed, however, that Blaise was still standing, with a dome-shaped shield around her. It didn't look all that strong, trembling with every spell it received and deviated, but it was enough to protect her.

"STOP! STOP!!" The idiot yelled. "Disarming charm only!!"

"*Finite Incantatem.*" Professor Snape cast. Even Harry knew that spell. It was a favorite of Flitwick's, whenever the class became too rowdy for him to control. It was also rather simple to use, proving even further that Lockhart had no idea what he was doing.

'Maybe he needs kiwspell lessons too.' Harry supposed, smirking as feeling in his legs returned.

"Hmm... I think I'd better teach you how to defend yourselves, first." Lockhart said. "Very well... Mister Weasley, Mister Finnigan, please..."

The two boys, who had been partnered together, groaned audibly.

"I think not." Professor Snape interrupted. "Perhaps the demonstration should be done on someone with more... *difficulty*, so that they actually learn correctly. Mr Longbottom, Mr Malfoy, come up here."

"I don't have difficulty, sir." Draco protested.

"I know that," Professor Snape said. "I just want to have *something* left of Mister Longbottom, and you are the best choice."

Longbottom gulped audibly, while Draco had a sinister smirk. A smirk that grew wider when Professor Snape whispered in his ear.

Meanwhile, Lockhart was coaching Longbottom on the proper way to block, which included, apparently, a fancy twirling on the wand followed by dropping it to the floor. The boy was *not* reassured any.

"Are you ready?" Professor Snape asked.

"Certainly," Lockhart replied, turning to Neville. "just do what I did."

The boy didn't answer back, his eyes wide open in terror, his knees shaking as he stared at the point of Draco's wand.

"At three." Professor Snape said. "One, two, three—"

"*Serpensortia!*" Draco, drawing pleasure in stretching every syllable, his eyes wide and his mouth twisted in a sinister smirk in a perfectly believable impersonation of an evil, dark wizard out for blood, cast.

A large grey snake with odd, empty, lifeless eyes burst out of Draco's wand and headed straight of Longbottom, who shrieked and fell on his butt. The crowd backed away as well, some of them giving odd looks at Draco. Many of the Slytherins in his year, however, stayed

up in front and cheered the platinum-haired boy on. Smirking, he soaked up the praises and applauses.

The snake had reached a terrified Longbottom's ankles and had hissed to a stand, mouth open in preparation for biting.

"Stay still, Longbottom. I'll get rid of it." Professor Snape said, pointing his wand at the snake. Longbottom closed his eyes; probably afraid Snape would take his ankle and let out with it.

"Allow *me!*" Lockhart chirped, grinning like an idiot. With a careless wave of his wand and a loud detonation, the snake was sent flying into the crowd the students, which quickly spread away with a common scream.

"Help!!" A boy's voice yelled. He was a Hufflepuff, laying on the floor with the snake looking at him directly in the eyes, mouth partially open and ready to strike. Harry was *sure* the snake was poisonous, though he couldn't guess why. Without thinking, he yelled at it:

"Stop!!"

And, surprisingly, the snake did, turning its empty eyes toward him. Harry felt his back chill. If the eyes were the windows of the soul, then there was nobody looking through these windows. Probably why it stopped, he reasoned. It was probably created to listen to orders.

"Come here." He ordered, knowing the snake would obey.

The snake started slithering toward him, but before it got halfway there, it vanished in purple smoke. Relieved, Harry allowed himself a smile, before looking up.

...*everyone* was staring at him, some with surprised expressions, most with terror covering their faces.

"What the..."

Before he could say anything, Blaise and Draco caught both of his arms and pulled him out of the room, followed by Emma, Hermione, Xu and Ginny, who looked unusually pale.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked, struggling to get out of his friends' grasp. "Why was everyone staring?"

Draco suddenly stopped and, roughly tearing Harry's arm out of Blaise's grip, rammed the black-haired boy into a wall.

"Why didn't you tell us you were a Parselmouth?!" Draco hissed.

"A... Parselmouth?"

"A person who talks Parseltongue, the language of the snakes." Hermione explained. "It's a rare gift, usually attributed to dark wizards. The last four Parselmouths in history all became either dark lords or very powerful dark wizards."

"Just because I'm one doesn't make me a dark wizard!" Harry snapped, pushing Draco away and releasing himself. "Besides, I didn't even *know* I was one."

"You have a snake for a pet and you didn't know you could talk to them?!" Blaise asked disbelievingly.

"I thought Nemesis was a magical snake that could talk! I never noticed I spoke another language!" Harry defended himself. "Besides, I saved that guy that way, so it should be all right, right?"

Their expressions were nowhere near reassured, except for Blaise's, who nodded. She apparently didn't know much about it

"Harry, you do know that, by tomorrow, the whole school will know you're a Parselmouth." Emma said.

"Yeah, so?" Harry asked. "As I said, it doesn't make me a da—"

"Salazar Slytherin was famous for being a Parselmouth." She continued, interrupting him. "And the gift is hereditary."

Understanding immediately what she meant, Harry shut up.

"Heredi...?" Xu asked, blinking.

"Hereditary means that it's given from parent to child." Hermione replied. "It also means that, by now, everyone is absolutely certain Harry is the heir of Slytherin."

"But I'm not!!" Harry protested.

"You can't really say that..." Hermione interrupted hesitantly. "The founders' family trees blurred with the ages, with some pure-blood families pretending to be their direct descendants. For all we know, you could really be his great-great-great-great grandson."

Harry blinked, suddenly feeling quite uncertain.

"Not that you're the one who's been attacking people." Blaise quickly said. "There's no way it's you, I'd have woken up that night Weasley was attacked. And you were in no condition to move."

However, it was soon proven that the rest of the students didn't share Blaise's opinion. By the next morning, Harry noticed people quickly moved out of his way and avoided looking at him in the eyes. Even if he made sure to wear his bandanna at all times, people recognized *that*, now. It had become nearly as famous as his scar, at least in the school.

After a horrible day at this, Harry found himself unable to sleep. Nemesis was, as he had taken a liking to do, hanging from one of the wooden poles where the curtains were attached. His eyes were open and staring at him.

"Sssso hhhyou mean dzzat efferyone knowsss hhhyou can talk to sssnakesss, now?" He asked.

"Yeah. Why didn't you tell me you weren't magical?!" Harry asked, frowning.

"I *am* magical." The snake replied irritably.

"Really? What can you do?"

"I hhhave sssome control ovver my body temperatshhhure, and I undersssstand hyuman language." He replied.

"...that's all?"

"What do hhhyou mean, 'Datsss all'?! I'll hhhave hhyou know that it isss very difffficult to breed a sssnake like me!"

"Right. Whatever." Harry said dismissingly, much to Nemesis' outrage.
"But why didn't you tell me I was a Parselmouth?"

"SSShought you knew."

Grumbling, Harry turned in his bed and looked away from his annoying pet.

"Doesss that mean I get to fffollow hhyou around, now? I don't really haiffe to hide anymore."

Harry fake a yawn and waved his snake off. "We'll see tomorrow."

"Fffirst thing in the morning." Nemesis agreed.

"Never said that." The boy protested irritably, before sighing. Nemesis wouldn't let him rest until he had what he wanted. Yawning, Harry lay on his back, staring up at the roof. The darkness of the night, added to the darkness of the dungeons, made the dormitory pitch-black and prevented him from seeing even his nose. Looking at nothing in particular, he thought.

"The founders' family trees blurred with the ages, with some pure-blood families pretending to be their direct descendants. For all we know, you could be his great-great-great-great grandson."

'Everyone thinks I'm the heir of Slytherin because I'm a parseltongue... but I'm not the one doing the attacks. Logically, the heir of Slytherin would be the only other person to speak Parseltongue.'

"Hereditary means that it's given from parent to child."

James Keith Potter

Gryffindor

72-79

‘Obviously, my father was a Gryffindor.’ He thought. ‘So he can’t have Slytherin blood, the hat would never have sent him there. That only leaves my mom... But she is muggle-born, so it makes no sense...’

Kwikspell

A Correspondence Course in Beginners’ magic

‘There are wizard-borns without magic... Perhaps one of Slytherin’s descendants was like that, and my mom was a descendant of him or her...’ He supposed, frowning. ‘But then there’d be a bunch of Muggles who could speak to snakes... I doubt that’s true. Besides, I’m not even sure she was a Slytherin. For all I know, she could have been a Gryffindor, too.’

‘Come to think about it, I don’t really know a lot about them, do I?’

“*Your father saved Severus’ life.*”

‘Professor Snape... he was at Hogwarts at the same time as dad... could he have been at the same time as mom, too?’

Yawning, Harry decided to shut his thoughts off and try to get some sleep, but not before making a mental note to ask his Potions teacher about this, later.

*"Oh Potter, you rotter, oh what have you done?
You're killing off students; you think its good fun -"*

**Peeves, Harry Potter et la Chambre des Secrets, page 217,
(Taken from VMorticia's Draco Malfoy's POV of Chamber of
secrets)**

Chapter 12: Ever seen a stoned ghost?

Harry Potter was, once again, not happy. This year had definitely not began like he wanted it, nor was it progressing at his wishes. In fact, it was all the opposite. What he wanted was a quiet, eventless year where he would be able to be a normal, twelve years old child. What he got was a crazy year with people being randomly attacked and petrified, a Weasley landing in Slytherin, a Quidditch captain that apparently decided to kill off his team so they could play without distractions such as breathing, and where he learned he had a rare gift that all other gifted turned to the dark side.

Said revelation caused quite an uproar, the morning after the duel club flop. The news had traveled everywhere, which was a surprisingly fast process in Hogwarts, and soon, Harry couldn't walk through the halls without being stared at warily, like he was some kind of evil, brain sucking alien.

His friends and Ginny's stayed loyal to him, not believing the rumors about his being the heir of Slytherin. Blaise, especially, was quite... physical, in her defense of Harry.

At least, until McGonagall removed 10 points because she defended his honor by slapping a third year Gryffindor silly. And Harry protested that it was all right and it didn't bother him.

Cough, cough.

~~~~~

*Extract from Harry Potter's diary, 18/12/92*

*I'll never understand the way the Wizarding world works. Or its people. I mean... Come on, it's because of me that we're in peace, now. If Voldemort hadn't attacked me and blasted himself, we'd still be in the middle of a war. And who was it who prevented Quirrell from bringing Him back last year? Me, with some help from my friends and Professor Snape.*

*But now, it looks like none of this matters now, just because I can talk to snakes. What's so bad about it, anyway?! So what, it's a dark gift, I never asked to get it. Besides, even a gift like that can be used for good. I saved that Hufflepuff, Justin Finch-Fletchley, didn't I?*

*Oh, no. The rumors say the boy-who-lived-to-talk-to-snakes **asked** that stupid snake to attack him, so that **has** to be the truth. Yipee. It's so stupid... almost like they'd rather believe the juiciest story instead of the truth. What's bad is that the rumors say I'm the heir of Slytherin, and it's me who's been attacking people. Meanwhile, the real heir can go about and kill people and put them on my back without anyone noticing, except pointing more fingers at me.*

*I hate being famous.*

*What's worst – yes, there's worse – is that Nemesis decided he didn't need to hide. Never mind that Snakes aren't allowed pets, here. He just followed me down in the common room and scared everyone out of their minds. I tried to tell him to go back up, but he just wouldn't*

*listen. Poor Ginny was terrified, she turned white as a sheet and ran off. Emma had to fetch her in a haunted girls' bathroom.*

*She's been writing in her diary a lot, lately. Ginny, I mean. As far as I know, Emma doesn't keep one, and if Xu does, I wouldn't be able to read it anyway. I think this whole heir of Slytherin thing is bad for those three. I mean, it's their first year and it should be something to remember in a good way. Not in a bad "people were being petrified everywhere and one of my friends was blamed" way.*

*Heh, going in circles, now. Time to go, Flitwick's waiting.*

~~~

The Gryffindors are lucky bastards. There's a blizzard, outside, and they had Herbology. Their lesson is cancelled. Meanwhile, we Slytherins have to survive through the last PRAT class of term. Thank Merlin it's the last one, though.

Lockhart decided to dress himself as a Christmas tree this time. I mean... normally, red and green don't go together too well. The white helps mellow it out. But the robes he chose glow and switch the bloody colors, like a light strobe. And because of the blizzard outside, it was dark inside. It gave the effect of a boring, red, green and white rave room with no music. And let's not forget the paintings of Lockhart on the walls.

Not like we can. Bloody idiot moved the "Lockhart drawing himself times infinity" portrait just behind his desk, so if we dare look at him, we have to look at half a million of him.

Finally, the bell!!

Scramming out of here,

Harry Potter.

~~~~~

Harry was walking outside of the school, in the snow, holding a plate of food in his hands, covered with an *impervius* charm. Fortunately,

snow seemed to count as water and twisted out of the plate's way as it fell. He wished he could have cast one on himself, but the charm didn't have enough power to protect someone whole.

Why was he walking in the middle of the blizzard? Because he was going somewhere.

Where?

"Hagrid? Are you in there?"

Does that answer your question?

The door of the small wooden hut, whose chimney was spewing more smoke than a hundred smokers in a tight hole, opened and the gigantic bearded man, this time dressed in a dull red coat, looked down at him.

"Blimey, Harry! Yeh got any idea how cold it is, outside?! Com'in, heat yerself up..." He said. Harry wholeheartedly agreed.

Hagrid noticed the plate Harry was holding while closing the door. "brought yer own food, did yeh?"

"Erm..." Harry blinked, feeling a bit uneasy. In truth, while he wanted to speak to Hagrid, he had no wish to die from food poisoning, and he was hungry. Bringing his own food was the only choice. "Well, I didn't want to force you to cook for me." He lied smoothly.

"Neeh, 'tsok, Harry." Hagrid replied with a grin, sitting down on a chair. "I know my cookin' ain't nowhere as good as the elves'. So, why'd yeh come out here for?"

"I needed someone to talk to." He sighed while starting on his food. He noticed, with annoyance, that the *Impervius* spell hadn't stopped the cold air from freezing his lunch.

"That's what I figured." The large man nodded, poking the roaring fire with an iron poker. "'bout the rumors, eh?"

"You heard them, too?"

Hagrid snorted. "I ain't *that* far out of school, Harry."

"Guess not. The centaurs probably heard it, too." The boy grumbled.

"If they did, they dun' seem teh care." He replied with a large shrug.  
"course, they dun' seem teh care 'bout anythin' that isn't happenin' at least on the moon, those things."

Harry nodded in agreement, remembering his own meeting with the stargazing creatures.

"It's just... It's like everything I did before... Voldemort and Quirrell... everything that shows I'm not on the dark side, it's like it doesn't matter anymore!"

"Yeh'll just have teh get used teh it." Hagrid sighed with uncharacteristic wisdom in his voice. "Sometimes, people'd rather blame the wrong culprit than no culprit 't all. Unfortunately, the wizardin' world ain't as nice teh it's criminals as the Muggle's."

"...did something like that happen to you, Hagrid?" Harry asked, blinking. This display of wisdom wasn't normal for him.

The giant man flinched, then suddenly looked at his watch and stood. "Well whaddya know, it's nearly time fer yer next class..." Harry almost protested at the hasty and obvious change of subject. "I'll get yeh back teh school... gotta talk teh Dumbledore anyway."

"About what?" Harry asked, curious, while putting on his robes.

"nother of my roosters got killed." Hagrid growled. "Gotta ask permission from the professor teh cast a few protection spells."

As they walked through the snow, heading back to the school, with the wind too strong for him to ask the large man questions, Harry thought.

*"A good wand... It was broken when you were expelled, though, wasn't it?"*

'Hagrid was expelled, I know that.' He mused, trudging along in the trail left by the man's huge feet. 'But from what I understand, he didn't do whatever he got expelled for... He was put in the same situation as me, and came out expelled, probably for doing less than everyone else think I've done. Does that mean I'm going to be expelled, too, if people really become certain I'm the one who's doing all this?'

'They wouldn't act without proof, would they...?'

Soon, he found himself back behind the comforting and warm stone walls of the school. The crowd was mostly gone, proving that, at least, Hagrid's distraction had been for real. It really was nearly time for him to get to class. Hagrid parted ways with him at the entrance, waving a loud goodbye. With a sigh, Harry dug into his bag and fished out his timetable.

"Transfiguration." He read out loud and, with a sigh, headed for the nearest stairway.

That particular stairway ended up with him somehow climbing up to the dungeons. He had since long decided it was impossible to give any logical explanation on the staircases of Hogwarts; there was simply no reasoning the fact that, by climbing up thirteen steps, a secret passage took you from the second basement to the sixth floor on the other side of school. Like most things in the magical world, such things defied logic with an untold panache.

"Hey, Potter!" A voice called after him.

Turning around, Harry spotted a handful of Hufflepuffs. For a moment, he wondered if Colin had found himself some groupie friends, but then he noticed a few things.

1: Colin was not there.

2: He knew them. They were in his year.

3: They all had their wands drawn, and none of them looked happy.

Carefully, Harry slipped his hand into his pocket and grabbed his own wand.

"What do you want?"

"We know you're after Justin." A well-built boy he recognized as Ernie Macmillan said. "You sent that snake on him and you'd have killed him if Professor Snape had not dispelled it."

"You're raving." Harry replied. "As I keep saying, I'm not the heir. Someone's trying to frame me."

He noticed, rather sadly, that should the argument become magical, he would not be able to dodge the blasts – the hallway was too thin, and there were too many of them.

"Right." A smaller, blonde girl called Hannah Abbot sniffed sarcastically. "Everything *always* happens to the great Harry Potter, after all."

"Enough talking, he's probably stalling to cast that petrification spell!" Ernie shouted, pointing his wand at Harry. "*Petrificus Totalus!!*"

"*Protego!!*" Harry quickly cast. He had only read of the spell before and never performed it. It was, therefore, not a surprise that the round shield surrounding him shattered after the spell had hit it. However, it did its job and sent the spell back at its sender, who barely avoided it. Another boy, who had been behind him, suddenly found himself on his back, unable to move.

"*Rictusempera!*" "*Tarentallegra!*" "*Expelliarmus!*"

Dodging the first two curses, Harry was unable to avoid the third and was sent flying, wand slipping out of his hand. The spell had been done poorly, however, as it didn't float back to the caster. It had, however, had enough strength to throw Harry against the wall, knocking his head on it and his breath out of his lungs.

Shaking his head to knock the stars out of his eyes, Harry looked up at his attackers, trying to find his wand at the same time.

"Looking for this?" Macmillan asked, grinning and holding Harry's wand.

Feeling a wave of despair, Harry quickly looked for a way out. A wall at the left. A long, straight hallway at the right. A wall behind. No possible way to escape. He was trapped.

"May I ask what you are all doing?" A voice asked from behind the Hufflepuffs.

Harry almost cheered. It was Professor Snape, heading toward them at a fast pace, wand drawn, cape billowing behind him.

"Er... Professor... we..." Hannah began to explain, obviously trying to find a good reason for them to be there.

"He's going to attack Justin!" Ernie suddenly shouted. "He bragged about it!"

"I did *not!*" Harry snapped back. "You gits ambushed me! Besides, I wouldn't brag alone, would I?"

"You bragged to us!" Another hufflepuff said.

"Oh, right," Harry said sarcastically. "Like I'd brag about attacking someone only to that person's friend. Besides, I am *not* the heir!"

"Anyhow," Professor Snape said loudly, taking the attention immediately in a practiced manner, "Casting spells in the hallways is not allowed. I remove fifty points from Hufflepuff, ten for each student, and a detention for each of you. Potter, in my office. The rest of you, why are you not in class?"

"P-Professor Lockhart let us out, sir..." Hannah Abbot stuttered.

Snape's lips thinned. Harry could guess he was holding back a mighty sneer.

"Then go back to his class. Rest assured, Professor Sprout *will* hear about this."

The five Hufflepuffs gulped audibly and left quickly for the upper floors, down the stairs Harry had walked out of.

It feels a bit weird writing that... oh whatever.

Silently, Harry followed the professor to the now nearly familiar office. He had been there five times in two years, now. Probably a record. The dreary room had not changed much, except that the candles had shrunk and the pile of essays and exams had done the exact opposite.

"Students are not the only ones who are glad of the arrival of Christmas vacations." Snape noted, moving his chair so he could sit while looking at Harry, without having a mountain of parchment in-between.

"Harry Potter." He began after a deep breath. "Once again, I find you in my office."

"You're the one who brought me here, sir." Harry quipped politely.

The teacher slowly shook his head. "Don't take that tone with me, Potter." He warned, frowning. Apparently, he was not in a good mood. "Would you mind explaining me why I nearly had an all out duel a few hallways from my office?"

Harry told him the truth, exactly what had happened. Professor Snape listened silently, head in his hands and elbows on his knees.

"Hmm." The teacher mused. "A bit more true to your character than *their* story. Yes, I believe it was indeed a situation of self-defense. Which brings me to my point."

Leaning further forward, the teacher gazed directly into Harry's eyes.

"Tread lightly, Potter. You probably know it very well, unless you have inherited your father's daftness, which I doubt, that you have many enemies outside these walls. Enemies who would not hesitate to

strike you down now, when you are weak and vulnerable. Should you be expelled – and even I do not have power over the headmaster's or the school council's decisions – you will be at their tender mercies. And note that, being heartless, sadistic serial murderers and servants of the dark lord, their so-called *tender* mercies are about as soft as a brick wall."

"I understand, sir." Harry nodded.

"From now on," Professor Snape continued, "You should never walk about alone. If this experience is proof of anything, it means that things are rapidly taking a turn for the worst."

Nodding again, Harry agreed wholeheartedly. They were, indeed.

"Also, I believe it is time you seriously learn to protect yourself. Miss Zabini, I have noticed, seems to have few notions of dueling. And if my memory serves me correctly," At this, the teacher sneered angrily, "her mother, as well. You should ask for their help."

"Yes sir." He nodded.

"Dismissed, then." He said, waving vaguely in the door's direction.

Harry got up and turned around, spotting Professor's Snape's graduation picture, hanging on the wall. It quickly reminded him of something.

"Sir..." Harry began, turning around again to face his teacher, who looked up from the papers he had returned to. "I've been wondering... you were at Hogwarts at the same time as my father, right?"

"Most to my displeasure." The teacher acquiesced. "And?"

"...did you know my mom, too?"

The teacher did not answer for at least half a minute, simply staring directly in Harry's eyes. Feeling increasingly uneasy, Harry couldn't help fidgeting.

"F-Forget I asked... if it's a sensitive subject, I..." He began, but Snape suddenly got up and walked toward his bedstand, picking the only picture there. Slowly, he walked back to Harry and put the picture in his hands.

It was one of a rather beautiful red-haired woman dressed in a black robe bearing the Slytherin crest and head girl badge, smiling and waving. But what struck Harry the most were her eyes.

They were his. Or were identical to his.

"Lily Evans Potter." Professor Snape said, sitting back down on his chair, letting Harry stare at the picture in his hands. "If there is one witch about whom many things could be said, it was her."

Harry said no comment, staring at the picture.

"She was simply the most amazing witch I have ever had the pleasure to meet. Oh, certainly, she caught the eye... quite pretty, indeed. Add to it incredible power over pretty much all of the school and influence over most students and teachers, she was certainly one you did *not* want to cross."

"Why?" Harry wondered.

"During her first two years, she was virtually unknown. Always quiet, staying silently in the background. She was a muggle-born, in Slytherin, in a time of war and incertitude. As you can guess, it did *not* make for a pretty picture. Often, she was the underdog, never taking the good end of anything."

"Then, in her third year, everything about her changed. She and three other witches who were two years younger than her, started to quickly gain power, while, in Gryffindor, four boys did the exact same thing. They were known, respectively, as the Raiders and the Marauders. Quite honestly, I believe their names should have been reversed."

"Your father was one of the Marauders." Ignoring Harry's look of surprise, he continued. "The ringleader, in fact. Both groups were strong and admired, causing trouble for anyone who got on their bad

side, which included each other. But while the Marauders preferred explosive and dangerous pranks worthy of nothing more but a daredevil, the Raiders acted in more subtle, but just as destructive ways.”

“Your mother was the craftiest, most cunning woman I have ever had the chance to meet. The students and teachers who got on her bad side did *not* have a good time, but not once did her revenges pointed at her or her friends... well, except for Lucia, but she actually enjoyed getting into trouble. And Professor Dumbledore just turned a blind eye and a deaf ear on them.” The teacher gave a small chuckle. “The result was quite obvious. Nobody crossed her. And her friends were just as scary, if not more. They were a close-knitted group, as well. They would have put their lives in the hands of each other in a heartbeat. Two of them... well, that’s another story.”

Harry noticed there was a small hesitation in his voice, as if he was... embarrassed... by what he had been about to say.

‘Maybe he used to fancy one of them...’ He supposed.

Taking a deep breath, the teacher continued, perfectly aware that Harry was hooked on his every word. This was more than he had ever heard about his parents.

“As I said before, she was very charming and cunning, yet she had a good heart. Oh, she was not universally liked. On the contrary; she was, after all, a muggle-born in Slytherin, as I said before. Just that fact forced her to be strong. As such, she did *not* tolerate anyone attacking someone younger or weaker than themselves.”

Harry blinked. His mother had been a Slytherin? Uh, ho... this didn’t sound too good. Wait... Evans?

*Lily Orchiddea Evans*

*Slytherin*

72-79

*"Heh, finally got a hand over the Marau—what? James is head boy?! How? Why? How?"*

...then... the head girl at that time... was his mother...?

"Potter... he was practically at her feet. Of course, she wanted nothing to do with him, since he was too arrogant and hot-headed, two qualities she despised. Add to it his show off of a friend, Black, and you ended up with one mighty bunch of spotlight-huggers. No. She hated him. Them."

"Then... um..." Harry hesitated on how to word his question, but the teacher asked for him:

"Why do you exist, then?" At his nod, Professor Snape gave a snort. "As arrogant and blunt as he was, he was, also, very brave. Her actions all over school had attracted the attention of the dark lord, who wanted her intelligence and influence for his, so he could perhaps attack Dumbledore on his blind side. His students have always been a bit of a weakness, a blind side that the dark lord thought he could use. Your father, with some assistance, rescued her. The respect he gained eventually grew into love, and eventually into a certain black-haired boy standing before me."

"Was she a Parselmouth?" He asked.

"Oh, no she wasn't. She had an intense dislike for snakes... nearing phobia, in fact. It was one of her few failings that were successfully exploited by the marauders. Believe me; you did *not* want to be one of them when she was returned to normal. They were still limping for a full week afterwards, the lot of them." The satisfied smirk on the teacher's face proved that this memory was one he relished.

"What did they do?" Harry asked, wondering what would be bad enough to attract his mother's wrath *that* badly.

"Are you aware of the Greek legend of the medusa?"

"The woman with the snake-hair? What's that got to do with... oh." Harry blanched at the mental picture, while the woman in real picture in his hands scowled and shuddered in apparent disgust. Mentally,

though, he wondered: ‘Then how did I become a Parselmouth? Was dad one?’

“Now, I believe your friends might—” He was interrupted when the door burst open and Draco Malfoy ran in, out of breath.

“Mister Malfoy, what in the w—”

“New attack... double petr... petrification...” He gasped between heavy breaths.

“Who?” Snape asked, suddenly very cold.

Harry blinked. Just a few seconds ago, he could have easily called Professor Snape’s behavior as ‘human’. Now, though, it was as if he had put on a mask. There was no visible trace whatsoever of the person Harry had talked to.

“...Finch-Fletchley...” He gasped first, taking a deeper breath to calm himself down while Harry stared, horrified. Exactly who the Hufflepuffs thought he was going to attack.

“You said double... who else?” Professor Snape asked, starting to walk forward, picking the picture of Lily from Harry’s hands.

“The Bloody... Bloody Baron, sir.” Draco Malfoy finished, looking up at the startled faces of Harry and Snape.

“A...ghost?” Professor Snape whispered, blinking.

**"Why spiders? Why couldn't it be 'Follow the butterflies'?"**

**Ron Weasley, Harry Potter and the chamber of secrets movie, forest scene**

**Pre-chapter scene:**

The readers, once again, find themselves into a small, cold, dark and generally... cardboard-colored, cardboard-furnished, cardboard-floored and walled bar made out of... well... you get the picture. On the remaining brick wall, proud remnant of the far, past history when the building owned itself instead of being controlled and enslaved by a poor, fic-fanatic, over-thinking, low-budget author, was stapled:

*No mob-be-gone sprays*

*Writers are pleaded to leave their keyboards in the box outside*

*No weapons allowed. This includes: Bombs, plasma guns, swords, blunt objects and Bartenders.*

The final word was crossed with a big, black X.

In a box outside the door, a good dozen of the deadliest weapons existing on the net – keyboards – were laid down, some chained with thick locks, others protected by pure titanium casings. There would be no security leaks.

Inside the bar, it seemed the only remaining thing that was left intact from all the fighting that had happened in the bad was, inexplicably enough, the scene, even though most of the fighting had taken place on it or around it.

The holes in the floor had been patched up, so no more people fell underneath. However, few readers complained to the bartenders about odd sounds coming from underneath, like voices, as if the

people who had fallen down in the first place had not gone out and were pleading for freedom.

The cardboard tables, which were starting to get soggy from the rain falling through holes in the cardboard roof, were accompanied by cardboard chairs, which could not easily hold the readers' weight for more than a minute before spectacularly breaking and sending their unfortunate victim sprawled on the ground. One such reader had unfortunately fallen through a roughly patched-up hole in the floor, soggy from being wet as well. Tribal ceremonial chanting could be heard, thanking their gods for their present, along with the unlucky reader's pleas to not be eaten alive.

And through all this, the figure dressed in a dark cloak on the scene smiled, although it could not be seen through his hood.

"Welcome!" He declared in a squeaky voice worthy of a chipmunk. "Ah, calisse, c'est quoi ca..." He grumbled, checking up on the FISHER PRICE VOICE THIGNY(tm) not too far behind him. "Testing, one, two... one, two... Ah, better." His voice had taken back the usual, echoing tone to it that was *certainly* not artificial. Hmm? You don't believe me? Well... um... \*hits a switch, doubtful reader fall through the floor\*

"Mwahaha. Author power." He chuckled darkly, before clearing his throat. "Where was I... ah yes. Welcome to the next Chapter of the Snake-who-lived—"

"Wouldst thou please hasten the pace," A reviewer asked.

Akuma-sama's hand reached for the switch, but then decided he should not, since Xu would suddenly find herself with fewer words to tell.

"Yeah, I mean..." a nameless reader who *dared* not to review piped up. "Why are we heeeaaaaaaaaahhhh!!!"

Satisfied, Akuma-sama let go of the switch, ignoring the new wave of ceremonial chants.

"I just wanted to tell you all: I have been eagerly waiting to write this chapter and the next, for a long, long time, ever since I decided that, Canon be darned, I'm having fun. Well, not be *darned*, but... oh hell. There is an absolutely enormous Anime Cameo in them, so huge it's almost *not* a cameo. Heck, the chapters are practically cameos themselves, but..." He looked a little later in his notes, then chuckled. "Nope, not just cameos. \*cough\* A quick explanation will be told at the end of next chapter for those of you who heretics who have not seen Ranma ½ yet... \*stare\*"

Some readers suddenly eye the floor carefully...

"But I really shouldn't need to explain it all," He said with a grin "since it's rather simple."

Those readers suddenly feel a little better.

"Special thanks to Simply Myself for the Chinese, to VMorticia for the beta and to me for actually thinking up this thing." He finished with a wink.

"Well now. Enjoy the show!"

## **Chapter 13: Curse of the Spider**

The latest attack had the positive point of putting doubts in people's minds about Harry's culpability. At least, it did so in the Slytherin house, since the stories all agreed – Harry, at the time of the attack

had been seen with Professor Snape and that weird, badly dressed groundkeeper... what's his name... Hag Ride? Oh, whatever.

Yup, they all said that.

Outside the green and silver house, however, the opinion was more divided. The Hufflepuffs mostly believed he was guilty and that he had some way to control the monster from a distance. Ravenclaws generally claimed that the story was impossible, since such a spell would require power near Dumbledore's level. Hufflepuffs retorted that he was as strong as Dumbledore, which was the reason why Voldemort wanted to kill him in the first place. Gryffindors opinions were very much divided and there was really no way to get a general consensus.

The result was that everyone was bickering among themselves and there was less finger-pointing at the boy-who-was-quite-glad-for-that.

The bell rang on the final class of term, a rather mild class of Charms. Flitwick, being in a festive mood, had simply asked them to keep their wands in their pockets and "do some pre-Christmas socializing!". Feeling rather cheerful, Harry walked out of the class, Blaise and Draco trailing behind, arguing about something or other, once again.

Some screams from behind them broke his mood, however, but not as much as the insane, merry cackling that came immediately afterwards. The three Slytherins gave each other a look and, at once, ducked; Harry behind a suit of armor, Blaise and Draco squeezing behind a column. It worked. Peeves flew by them, not noticing them, lobbing fresh eggs randomly at people while laughing merrily.

Without the Bloody Baron to hold him back, Peeves was being absolutely horrible, doing everything he had ever wanted but wasn't allowed to because of the ghost. That morning, the tables had started to float, along with the forks and knives. Fortunately, nobody had been seriously hurt – in a relative sense, considering what magic could heal – but it had taught everyone a valuable lesson – don't get in Peeves' way. Harry was almost tempted to write his name down on the list of the students leaving and duck for cover at the Zabinis'.

"Hey, guys, want to come to the owlery with me?" Blaise asked, showing a letter. "I've got to ask mom about the you-know-whats."

The two boys gave each other smirks and nodded at the girl, who walked ahead.

The previous evening, he and Draco had walked into a frenzied Slytherin common room, where gossip and rumors were being exchanged like titles at a stock exchange. Blaise had literally jumped on the two of them and demanded to know where they had been. After basic explanations leaving her satisfied enough, Harry had remembered what Snape had asked him.

"Dueling lessons?" She had repeated. "Hmm... well, with what just happened, I guess it's a good idea. I'm not an expert, though. Mom has a few books on it, though. I'll owl her about it."

And there they were, doing exactly that in the owlery. Athena, the Zabini's guest-hostile eagle owl, gave them a ferocious glare while Blaise tied the letter on her leg.

"Mom's probably going to give you a bunch of things to bring back, so save your strength. Ok, girl?" at the owl's understanding hoot, the red-haired girl smiled and threw Athena in the air, from where she took flight and departed through open windows on the roof.

"Nice bead." Xu's voice said, her accent messing up her words as always, as the girl entered the owlery.

"Isn't she?" Blaise agreed, smiling at the rapidly shrinking spot in the sky.

Xu blinked and nodded, apparently replying to Blaise's question. With a shrug, she put two fingers in her mouth and let out a loud, piercing whistle.

An indignant hoot came from above. Harry definitely heard the beating of wings going past him, but didn't see a thing. Xu lifted her arm and, much to Harry's surprise, her sleeve suddenly tightened around her arm, as if something had landed on it.

“Wicked!” Draco gasped. “A stealth owl!!”

Harry blinked at Draco then looked back at Xu’s arm. Now that he knew there was an owl there, he could barely see the outline of a small, foot-tall birdlike shape, as if light was bending at some place in his vision.

“He that, yes,” Xu said, nodding, while feeling around the talons of the owl for the ring where she would be able to tie up a letter. “But he also very fast... sound-fast... what is word...”

“Supersonic?” Harry suggested.

“Yes, that.” Xu said with a smile. “Soupaasounic.”

“Supersonic *and* Stealth?!” Blaise blinked. “Now *that’s* an owl.”

A pleased hoot came from the spot above the Chinese girl’s arm.

“I guess he would have to be,” Harry mused out loud. “if he’s flying back and forth between China...”

“What’s his name?” Draco said while rubbing the side of the owl’s head, at least... where he *thought* it was.

“It Yinying.” She said while tying the letter. “Mean Shadow. It fitting.”

“Who are you writing to anyway?” Blaise asked.

“Uncle.” Was the girl’s answer, along with a small, mischievous smirk. “Christmas presents.”

“A letter?” Draco blinked. “A letter for a Christmas present?”

“No, asking for gift for giving. No receive.”

‘She’s asking for someone else’s gift.’ Harry corrected mentally, wondering exactly why she was grinning so evilly while saying it.

The next day was spent quietly playing and reading in the common room while watching, with much amusement, most of their house scramble about for their belongings. Xu and Ginny helped Emma, who had unfortunately handed her autographed – and handed down by Harry Potter - version of the Lockhart books to people all over the house.

Going to the station was rather useless, at least, for Harry. He didn't really know the young McKinnon all that much.

"Don't you worry, I'll be back!" She declared, taking a pose. "There's no way a McKinnon won't go to school simply because people are being petrified!"

And, from then on, Harry was one of the few students in the school, with the Weasleys forming the great majority of the crowd. The first few days were fun, since, after the blizzard, pleasantly cool days came around, perfect for some snowball fights outside, only growing harder when Fred and George decided to join in, using charmed snow to attack the Slytherins, with Hermione backing them up – house loyalty, after all. Harry took this as a good sign; perhaps the twins were starting to see how stupid they had been.

Ron, however, was nowhere to be seen.

Mrs Zabini's answer came a week before Christmas, in the form of not one or two, but six large manuals on curses, hexes and dueling techniques, along with a very tired and exhausted eagle Owl.

*Blaise,*

*I perfectly agree. I had no idea the situation was this bad – the daily prophet only says there are incidents at Hogwarts, without revealing much of what it's about. Probably Dumbledore's work. Here are a few manuals to help out. I know it will be useful.*

*Everything else is fine, except for your dad doing overtime again.*

*Love,*

*Mom*

*P.S: Hide the big red book; it is supposed to be only for Aurors.*

Harry let out an appreciative whistle after reading the note, giving a look at the manuals. The third one was especially large and had a red cover, which meant it probably was the one she had been talking about. Quickly taking it, Harry managed to slide it under his robes.

The manuals proved to be *very* advanced, especially the red one. As much as they tried, neither Harry, Draco nor Blaise managed to cast most of the spells described. And it wasn't by lack of effort. Blaise, after managing to cast a blood cooling charm on a frog, suddenly started to feel dizzy and light headed.

"Magical exhaustion." Draco diagnosed. "I'd say she won't be able to cast spells for... oh, I'd say a day or so."

"Aww *great.*" She complained in an airy tone, unable to muster enough energy to be angry.

The frog, unfortunately, being a cold-blooded creature, did not survive being charmed by *that* spell. Strangely enough, it disappeared a few minutes later. Nemesis complained of an odd chill in his stomach for the rest of the day.

Draco's diagnosis was not entirely correct. Half a day later, during dinner time, Blaise was merrily levitating the strawberry jam closer to her grasp.

"Ugh." Harry shuddered. "Blaise, I know you like the stuff, but... *strawberry jam on ham?*"

"What?" The girl asked, spreading generous amounts of the sweet fruit jam on the meat. "I like it."

"It looks worse than when Fred and George decided to make a fruitcake." Ginny noted.

"And what did it look like?" Draco asked with a smirk.

"You don't want to know." The girl quickly replied, staring blankly.

"Oh, shut *up!*" Blaise shrieked while Ginny and Draco burst out laughing. "It can't look *that* bad!"

"Oh no it doesn't, really." Harry agreed, drawing a grateful look from the girl and disbelief from the others. "But I'm sure it tastes worse."

The dark-red haired girl huffed angrily while the blonde and other red-head burst out laughing again.

Suddenly a loud hoot came, along with the sound of wings beating the air. But there was no visible bird anywhere in the room. Xu grinned.

"Yinying!"

The invisible owl landed on her outstretched arm – at least, Harry *supposed* he did – a second before a small, worn purple box roughly sealed with mundane, Muggle brown tape landed on the table, Chinese characters written across it, along with a letter scotch-taped to it.

"Uncle send Ginny brother gift!" The girl said with a grin, ripping the letter from the box.

"You prepared a gift for my brother?" Ginny asked disbelievingly. "I thought you didn't like him!"

"Ginny thought right." Xu nodded with a smirk. "That lesson."

"Hungry?" Blaise asked, presenting the invisible owl a bit of her ham.

Though nobody could see it, Harry was *certain* it had refused with a 'Are you crazy or just insane' look. When the ham remained on her

fork, the girl huffed and crossed her arms, not-so-accidentally staining the sleeve of Draco's robe.

"What does he say?" Ginny asked, her voice rising over Draco's protesting and outraged gasp, reading over the smaller girl's shoulder, scowling a bit at the undecipherable Chinese symbols on it.

"Say 'I very busy and in hurry, so could not give only what Niece want. Honored guests got cursed, Panda, Girl and Pig. Very tragic story of fools who no listen to warnings. Plum say hello.' She read, trailing her finger over the symbols while reading.

"I have no idea how you can read that." Ginny admitted with a small sigh. "Oh well. What did you get, anyway?"

Xu's face lit in a rather sadistic grin while she hugged the box to herself. "I no tell. Wait for Christmas."

Xu was hardly seen for the following five days. Ginny spent most of her time with the older Slytherins while doing a great job at avoiding her brothers – a mightily difficult task indeed. She, however, seemed to fall in some sort of gloom as Christmas approached.

While Harry had never really had a family Christmas, he knew from what he had seen on the TV that it was a special thing to normal children, which was meant to be celebrated as a family. At the Dursleys', it had mostly been an occasion for Dudley to get his yearly thirty-something presents while giving nothing back.

'It's probably her first Christmas without her family.' He supposed.

Then, on the morning of Christmas Eve...

"Mornin'." Blaise energetically declared, swiftly sitting down on the couch with the grace of a gorilla, the energy of Crabbe's brainpower

and the speed of a government functionary. Her hair had the clean, well-brushed look of a palm-tree forest after a class “ouch” hurricane.

“Hey.” Draco welcomed, holding a cup of hot chocolate in his hands, his body wrapped in a thin, white and green blanket near the fire. He looked about as warm as a slab of meat in an industrial freezer.

“Io.” Ginny mumbled, wearing a light red Weasley jumper with a big, pink G on it. Her wide and happy smile gave everyone about the same cheerful mood as a funeral hall.

“Good morning!” Harry said glumly, scowling as badly as someone who had just won the lottery.

In truth, unless you haven’t already guessed, Harry was the only one who was actually happy, that morning.

“Is it always this *bloody* cold down here?!” Draco wondered.

“Yup, you’ll just have to get used to it, Draco.” The black-haired boy said with a nod and a smile.

“And how come you’re so damn chirpy this early!?” He asked.

Why was he so happy? He didn’t really know, actually. It was probably one of those unexplainable, merry moods that people sometimes wake up in. He felt certain nothing could go wrong about this day. After all, it was Christmas Eve!

“I dunno. I’m just happy!” He replied.

“Right.” The other boy deadpanned, snuggling deeper in his blanket. “It’s too bloody cold to be so friggin’ cheerful.”

“specially so ‘rly ‘n dhe mornin’.” Blaise mumbled while stealing Draco’s cup of hot chocolate and taking a deep, long drink. “Ahh, that’s better.”

Scowling, Draco snatched the cup out of the girl’s hands, only to see she had drained it dry.

"I hate you." He told her flatly.

Blaise mock-recoiled and declared in a false accent: "Ouch, you wound me, Draco Malfoy. I am hurt by your declaration of hatred toward an innocent maiden such as I."

"You should." He grumbled, while putting the cup down on the ground, where it vanished and was replaced by another, full of steaming hot liquid.

"Nihao!" Xu said cheerfully as she literally appeared behind the two arguing Slytherins, quite effectively scaring them senseless, clutching the purple box to her chest. She still hadn't told anyone what was in it, but the tape that had been sealing it was now ripped. Apparently, the box had been opened.

"Are you going to tell us what's in there, now?" Harry asked, pointing at it.

Xu gave him a smirk and nodded. "Late."

"Later." Ginny corrected. "It's not something that's going to hurt him, is it?"

Xu shook her head. "It no painful, no dangerous, but very... punisha'?"

"-ing."

"Punishering." Xu corrected herself, causing Ginny to slap her forehead.

Breakfast came. The great hall was rearranged. As there were so few students in the school, only one table was necessary for both the eight students and the members of the staff, minus Dumbledore, as he had left that morning on urgent business for the ministry. Ginny was in a heated discussion with Hagrid about, from what he could tell,

the dangers of raising a dragon, seeing as her big brother Charlie was a dragon keeper. Fred and George were beside Xu and Draco, who both looked rather uncomfortable when both offered them some “innocent Christmas treats.” Ron, sitting at the end of the table, beside Hermione and in front of McGonagall – who had taken that place to watch over the twins – was sulking, most likely because of the fact that he was stuck between the two most disciplinarian witches in the school at the moment and the two biggest pranksters in Hogwarts history, as far as they knew.

Somehow, Harry found himself squeezed between Blaise and, to his chagrin, Lockhart, who talked to him loudly while Harry did his best to ignore him.

He gave a suffering look at the girl beside him, who barely stifled a snicker. While Lockhart was busy trying to depict the basic size of “that fearsome, terrifying dragon” he had defeated to an uncaring audience, Blaise took one of her green peas and transformed it into a rather realistic, though not alive, little grey rat. An animation charm later, she had set it on the floor, aiming it at Lockhart’s robes.

“And its head turned toward me, oh that was *something* to see, Harry! That thing must have been at least seven feet long! Its eyes were tiny, I could barely see them... but I could definitely see the evil red they were glowing... then, it saw me and roared... it sounded like an extremely loud---ahhhh!!” With an unmanly shriek, Lockhart literally jumped, throwing his chair backwards, Blaise’s animated rat clinging to his robes. “GETTITOFFGETTITOFF!!”

Unsurprisingly, the assembled students shared a good, loud laugh, while McGonagall did her best to look stern – failing miserably. A look at Snape later, Harry was nearly sent into hysterics again. The normally scowling and moody teacher was evidently still at the stage of trying *not* to burst out in roaring laughter.

With a lazy wave of his wand made to prove the performed charm was simple and extremely easy to cast, Professor Snape drawled a tired, but extremely amused: “*Finite Incantatem*”.

The animation charm was dispelled and the rat stopped moving, not releasing its hold on the bumbling blonde’s lavender robes.

Lockhart, ripping the rat off his robes, tearing claw-shaped holes in them, then turned to Blaise, glaring angrily.

*“How dare you!!”* He shrieked, pointing at her wand, which she had forgotten to hide. “Those were my favorite robes!!”

“Twenty points from Slytherin, Zabini.” McGonagall snapped, while Lockhart continued to complain, pointing at the tiny, barely visible scratches on his clothes.

“Professor Lockhart, a simple sewing charm can take care of those tears. If you want...” Flitwick said, taking out his wand.

Harry blinked, seeing an odd, mischievous blink on the tiny teacher. No, apparently, Dumbledore’s decision did *not* make unanimity.

If it did, though, it was in a negative way.

“Oh, no, it’s all right!” Lockhart said assuredly. “I’ve done it a thousand times! After all, you don’t wander in the jungles of Mongolia without getting your clothes a bit roughened up!”

And he left, while the three second year Slytherins turned to each other.

“Do dragons really sound like that?” Harry asked jokingly.

“Maybe a new, undiscovered and extremely stupid race of dragon does.” Blaise replied, a look of mock-seriousness on her face.

“I can see it now,” Draco declared with a majestic wave of his hand and an awed voice “an endangered race: The Lockhart Loud-shriek, named after its discoverer and rather shrilly roar.”

“Endangered because too stupid to breathe without being reminded.” Blaise added, before she burst into laughter, followed by the others.

The next time the Slytherins found Lockhart, he was walking in the halls, dressed in another robe. He had not apparently cast the spell.

He would most likely have failed it anyway. As he passed by them, he shot a hateful glare at Blaise, who grinned back pleasantly, trying to unbalance and confuse him.

Slytherin code of conduct, rule one hundred and two: Smile, it makes people wonder what you are thinking.

“Prick.” She muttered as soon as he was out of earshot.

“Such language! What would your mother say?” Draco asked.

“She’d agree and add: ‘Egoistic, incompetent, son of a—’”

“Definitely.” Harry interrupted, censored and agreed, absentmindedly eavesdropping on the two younger girls, walking behind him.

“When are you going to use it?” Ginny asked Xu, pointing at the box.

--Arrogant, self-obsessed, inspiration for Barbie-dolls, rat ars--” Blaise’s list of possible Lockhart terms of endearment was interrupted by an irritated Draco’s hand.

Smirking, the Asian girl playfully waved a finger in front of her mouth and winked.

“That is secret.”

Somewhere far, far away, a purple-haired trickster priest sneezed.

“Oh, come on!” Ginny whined loudly, attracting the other two older students’ attention. “Please? You got me curious about this. And everyone else, too.”

“Oh, ok.” Xu relented, although she did *not* seem disappointed at all, as if she couldn’t wait to do it herself, looked around and found the closest bathroom. “Follow.”

Once everyone was inside the bathroom, the Chinese girl walked to the sinks and let the purple box down beside it. Smoothly, she removed the lid, revealing a single wooden stick and more than a dozen small, colorful bags. Each bag had different Chinese symbols on them, but, as Harry was unable to read it, he couldn't tell what any of it was.

"Ta-da!" The girl declared with a grin, holding up one of the bags.

"...You want to invite Weasley to a tea party?" Draco asked flatly.  
"Quite honestly, I don't see what's so great."

"That, instant Jusenkyo powder!" Xu explained, as if saying that explained anything.

"What does it do?" Blaise asked.

"That is surprise." Xu said with a grin, taking a bit of toilet paper from a nearby stall and transfiguring it into a rough, paper glass.  
"*Impervius*" She cast as well, as if she did *not* want liquid to slip through the thin paper. She fished in the box, pulling out one bag in particular.

"That Zhizhunichuan powder. Extract from original Zhizhunichuan spring in Jusenkyo. Very tragic story of spider that fall in spring and drown 250 years ago."

"Very interesting." Draco drawled lazily and sarcastically.

Undaunted, Xu filled the paper cup with water and ripped the bag open. Inside was nothing but apparently harmless, regular dirt, but the black-haired boy felt his back chill upon seeing it. Something about this was dangerous, he knew it.

She emptied the bag in the cup, then, very carefully, mixed it with the stick with apparently excessive caution. Harry had the feeling he did *not* want to touch the water.

"There. Now we go find stupid Ginny brother."

“Ginny’s stupid brother.” Blaise corrected while Harry heard the younger red head grumble something about giving Xu private English lessons presto.

For ten minutes, they roamed in the halls. Xu was extra-careful with the cup she was holding. A single drop of water fell out and dropped harmlessly to the ground, but she recommended stepping around it.

“Come on, how can it be so dangerous?! It’s just dirty water!”

“You see when find him.” Xu replied, before grinning and pointing down the hall. “There he is.”

Sure enough, Ron was there, talking to Hermione. Or more like arguing with her. But then again, as far as conversations with her went, this was pretty much regular and usual.

“Ron, it’s Christmas. Please, talk to her... For me? It’s not like she *asked* to be sorted there---”

“I don’t care!” Ron returned. “You don’t understand, Hermione... Weasleys have *always* been Gryffindors, as far as our recorded family tree says. It’s the Weasley family honor that she’s—”

“That’s *Percy* who said that.” Hermione snapped. “Why won’t you base your opinion on your own feelings at all, Ronald Weasley?!”

“I-I am!!”

“You don’t sound sure to me!”

With that, Hermione stormed away, looking angry enough to hex whoever dared talk to her next.

“Now is chance!” Xu said with a smirk, walking toward Ron, who was huffing and looking the other way, grumbling to himself, kicking at the

ground. As soon as she was close enough, the Asian aimed and threw the water all over the boy, who...

"WH—"

...vanished, his clothes suddenly falling to the ground as if nobody was inside them.

"Wh---what did you do!?" Ginny gasped in horror.

"Instant Jusenkyo curse." Xu declared with a smirk. "Zhizhunichuan curse make someone turn in..." She trailed off, digging through the empty robes. With a tug, a red... thing fell to the floor out of the robe's sleeves. "spider."

Sure enough, a red-furred spider as big as a hand was lying on its back, eight legs waving haphazardly. It was much, much too big to be native, however.

"Can I squash him?" Draco asked eagerly, grinning.

"NO!" Ginny snapped. "Xu, turn him back."

The Asian girl pouted and pulled out her wand, then hesitated.

"What's wrong?" Ginny asked.

"Ummmm..." Xu hesitated, fiddling with her wand nervously. "No remember cure... *duibuqui*?"

"WHAT?!" The red-head shrieked, picking her brother off the ground with one hand, the other hand going for the smaller girl's green and silver necktie, "What do you mean, you don't remember?!"

The spider in her hand looked quite terrified. It was shaking, its tiny head looking at its four front legs.

"But it written on back of bags." Xu quickly added, calming her friend. "Just have to go and get it."

"Well, lets." Ginny said with a sigh. "As pig-headed as he's being, he doesn't deserve to be stuck as a spider forever."

The head of the spider snapped up, at least, as far up as it could. The two front legs gave a sharp hit at the girl's hand, which she barely felt. Spider or not, Ron apparently did *not* appreciate being called a pig-head.

As they walked back in the bathroom to turn Ron back to normal, they noticed something was wrong, however.

"The... The box!" Ginny gasped. "It's gone!"

"Who take it?" Xu asked turning to them.

"Not us!" Harry replied, shaking his head. Damn, that was just what he needed! A box capable of turning people into god-knows-what loose in the hands of could-be-anyone!

He made a mental list of who could have taken it. Since his friends, Hermione and Ron had been with him the whole time, they were crossed out already. That left:

A teacher: Not so bad, depending on whom.

Filch: Pretty bad, since they'd have to fetch the cure from him.

Fred and George: Oh-Please-Lord-Shoot-Me-Now bad.

And one final choice... The very worst possible possibility, the very worst pair of hands in the school...

His musings were interrupted by a loud and chillingly familiar female scream that turned rather high-pitched in the end.

"Hermione!!" Harry gasped, running out, followed by his friends. Dashing, he went to the source of the scream...

...and found a cat.

A brown cat.

A little brown cat with rather puffy, bushy fur that made it look like a fur ball with eyes, completely drenched, looking quite startled, and standing on ruffled, empty robes bearing the crest of Gryffindor.

"Hermione?" Harry asked.

"Meow...Meow?! Meeoowww!!" The girl-turned-cat gasped, her left paw going to her throat upon hearing her voice.

"Who did this?" Draco asked, looking around.

A loud cackling echoed between the walls, chilling everyone's backs.

"Peeves." They echoed.

*If there is a possibility of several things going wrong, the one that will cause the most damage will be the one to go wrong.*

Damn you, Murphy.

*"Ayaa! Honored costumer fall in Nyannichuan! Very Tragic story of girl who drown in spring 1500 years ago! Now whoever falls in spring take shape of young girl!"*

## **Jusenkyo guide, Ranma Nibunnoichi, Episode 1**

**Warning:** Multiple scene changes! And lots of craziness, I scared myself more than once! ^\_^

**Author's note:** This chapter is HUGE. Longest I've ever written. That is, in this fic.

### **Chapter 14: Hailey Potter**

For once, it was *Hermione* who was not happy. Everyone else around her was either: scared, terrified or horrified. By everyone, it meant Harry Potter, Draco Malfoy, Blaise Zabini, Xu Chang, Ginny Weasley and the little red spider in her hands, who was actually a cursed Ron Weasley.

Why wasn't she happy?

Because she was soaked. Wet cats usually are not very happy creatures.

Oh, yeah. It was also due to the fact that she was not *usually* a cat.

Add to it the fact that she looked like a puffed-up fur ball on paws, it made her want to scream... pardon me... meow in rage.

“Peeves got the Jusenkyo powder.” Blaise said. “And the only way to turn Hermione and Ron back is to get the instructions on the back of the bag?”

The Asian girl, who was the owner of said box, nodded darkly.

“What about the Zhizhuunichuan bag?” Ginny asked, spider-Ron in her hands.

“I leave it in box.” Xu sighed, before muttering something in Mandarin, probably berating herself.

“Well then,” Harry said, taking out his wand, “let’s go catch Peeves.”

“Meow.” Hermione agreed.

And as the humans and two animals walked in the direction from which the Poltergeist’s voice had came from, a soft song came to their ears. A courage bolstering music, meant to reassure them and make them certain they would catch the little devil and bring their friends back to human form...

...“Mission Impossible”, hummed by Blaise Zabini.

~~~

Near the other side of the school, Peeves was scowling. In one hand was a bucket full of water. In the other, a familiar purple box, which was the target of the Poltergeist’s ire.

“How the hell am I supposed to use it if I can’t tell what I’m going to turn people into?!” He wondered, trying to will the symbols into turning into letters.

Apart from that small problem, he was having the time of his unlife. This... Jusenkyo thing, at least, that’s what the girl called it, was a devil send; the opportunity of turning everyone into things they were not meant to be, coupled to the fact that both the Bloody Baron – Peeves shuddered in fear – and Dumbledore were gone made this an opportunity for causing chaos that was not to miss.

“Are you sure it’s that way?”

“The map doesn’t lie, Fred. It’s that way.”

“It’s a bit out of date, though.”

“So? If the passage is closed like the last two, we’ll update it. But if it’s not... come on! It’s Hogsmeade day anytime we want!”

Cackling merrily, Peeves jumped to his next victims, picking randomly picking a bag out of the box. With a single sweep, the undead doused both twins with the cursed water...

~~~

“Which way, now?” Harry asked.

Hermione hissed angrily. Already bad enough that she was forced to do this, it didn’t make her want to be ordered at it, too.

As she lowered her head to the floor, she wondered if they thought she had been splashed with instant spring of the drowned dog water. Besides, trying to catch the smell of a Poltergeist was difficult indeed, and she hadn’t graduated from hunting school or taken the tracking classes.

“I say we separate.” Draco said. “We’ll have more chance to catch him.”

“And what are we going to do if we catch him?” Blaise asked.

“Wrestle the box away and run back to Xu so she can get the cure.” The platinum-haired boy said. “It’s worth a shot.”

“I agree.” Harry nodded. “Xu, you stay here with Ron and Hermione. Hide. We don’t want Peeves to get you. You’re the only one of us who can actually *read* the bloody bags.”

The Asian girl nodded in understanding and, hesitatingly taking the rather large red spider from Ginny’s hands, she walked away, followed by Hermione.

And, few minutes later, the group was separated.

~~~

Fred blinked, completely drenched. Beside him, his twin was just as wet.

“...Peeves is losing originality, is he?” George asked.

“Yeah,” Fred said, frowning “I mean, I know subtlety isn’t his strong point, but just splashing water on people?”

“Actually, I find it quite creative.”

“Umm?” Fred asked, looking at George. “What do you mean?”

“I was about to ask you the same question.” George replied, before noticing something. “Um... you know you’re naked?”

“Well, what do you know,” Fred returned, looking down at himself, then at his twin. “you know you’re naked, too?”

George looked down at himself and nodded affirmatively. “You’re right... clothe-vanishing waters?”

Then, he saw something else: standing behind them was...

“Um... George, you know you’re over there?” Fred asked, pointing at the fully clothed George.

“Eh?” “Yeah, I know.” Both Georges said at the same time.

“And you know you’re over here?” Another Fred asked the naked Fred.

“Blimey, I didn’t!” Fred replied, looking at his own double.

The four twins blinked in unison, looking each other up and down, then smirked in an identical manner.

“Wicked.” They agreed in eerie unison.

~~~

Harry grumbled. His day had been going so well, too. Waking up in a good mood, watching Lockhart getting humiliated at dinner time, watching Ron turn into a spider...

“Couldn’t she have read the instructions *before* using the bloody powder!?” He swore, turning at a corner. So far, he hadn’t seen Peeves, or any cursed animals. Which was, respectively, a bad and good thing.

Tired, he walked to the closest window and opened it slightly to cool himself down with the cold, winter air. Laying his elbows on the windowsill, he gazed outside, hoping to catch some sight of Peeves.

‘If we can’t catch Peeves, who knows what will happen to Hermione and Ron.’ He thought, frowning. Though he hadn’t seen much of the girl and hadn’t really been on talking terms with the boy since the start of the year, it didn’t make him wish they were stuck out of their natural forms forever.

“Hey Potter!” A twin said, walking behind him.

“Hey Weasley.” He replied, listening to the boy’s footsteps walking away.

“Hey Potter!” Another twin said.

“Hey Weasley.” He replied, not looking as the other boy left.

“Hey Potter!” Yet another twin said.

Absentmindedly, Harry mumbled a “Hey Weasley.” Once again, the footsteps went, in the same direction as the others.

“Hey Potter!” A fourth twin said, heading in the same direction.

And Harry’s brain caught up to him. Quickly, he whirled around...

...he was alone.

"Weird..." He mused. He was about to investigate when a very familiar cackling came to his ears. "Peeves!"

~~~

He stumbled on a strange scene. A furious – pun intended – Hermione was leaping at Peeves, who was laughing madly while pulling his tongue at her, floating just a bit too high for her to claw him. With a loud crackle, the poltergeist floated through the roof.

"Hermione! Where's Xu?!" Harry asked.

The cat-girl, once again, pun intended, lowered her head, and pointed, with her thick, bushy tail, at somewhere near the wall.

The wall was soaked.

Fearing the worst, he looked down.

A small, light brown-furred Hamster was looking down at herself with oddly thin eyes, mouth gaping in horror.

"Oh, Merlin." Harry cursed.

~~~

"I'VE GOT YOU!!" Filch cheered as he finally caught up to the insolent boy who had dared plant a dungbomb in his office. "Foolish boy, there's only two fourth year Gryffindors in the school, and it's you and your twin brother!"

"Got in one!" George said cheerfully from Filch's right while his brother grinned, not resisting against the caretaker's grip. "He's so smart, eh Fred?"

"Definitely." Fred said just as cheerfully from Filch's left, while... eh?

Filch's brain recalculated the situation.

He had a Weasley twin in his grasp.

There was a Weasley twin at his right.

There was a Weasley twin at his left.

Then who... what... how...?

"Oh my, is poor little Filchy-poo confused?" Yet *another* twin said, this time from behind him.

Thoroughly confused and surrounded at all sides with expert and identical troublemakers, Filch did the only thing he could think of.

He fell to his knees and wept.

~~~

Hermione on one shoulder, Ron and Xu on the other, Harry ran after Peeves, hoping to prevent more people from being transformed. This day had *definitely* taken a turn for the worst.

'I mean... is it too much to ask for, a calm, eventless year, or maybe just a month?!"

He caught up to Peeves on the seventh floor, nearly out of breath. The thrice damned ghost was browsing through the box while filling the bucket with fresh water in a watering place.

"Give me the box, Peeves!" Harry snapped, taking out his wand.

...Obviously forgetting one of the first rules of catching up to someone and taking someone from him: Saying corny lines before doing anything only works in TV shows, cheap "magical girl" anime or stereotyped Fanfiction.

...I believe I broke the stereotypes so far, wouldn't you say? ^_-

Startled, Peeves emptied the first bag that got under his hand and, without waiting for the bucket to fill up, launched the cursed waters at Harry.

Quidditch training kicked in, causing him to quickly duck underneath the area his instincts were telling him was dangerous. Unfortunately, the result was not as intended. The added weight of the animals

made him lose his balance and threw said cursed people to the ground. Also important to note, water does not take the same path as Bludgers.

Gravity took over.

At three, damn Murphy once again! Three!!

As soon as Harry felt the cold water hit his back, he gasped in horror, his eyes reflexively closing. The strangest tingling feeling passed everywhere through his body. It lasted perhaps half a second, but it made him realize he had been cursed.

‘Oh Merlin... what am I, now?’ He wondered, daring to open his eyes.

Hands.

He still had hands. He was, therefore, still human.

“Eh? Am I immune or something?” He wondered in a higher-pitched voice than usual, before his hands went to his throat.

“What the?!” Puzzled, Harry looked down at his reflection in the small puddle of water at his feet.

He had lost a few inches of height – which was something in itself – and his shoes and socks felt oddly baggy. His hair had changed color, and so had his eyes. Instead of having unruly, untamable and pure black hair with deep emerald green eyes, he found himself staring at a smooth skinned face with hazel eyes and nearly silky auburn hair. He recognized the color of his hair from the picture of his mother Professor Snape had showed him, although it was a shade or two darker.

Then, he realized something. His voice was higher, though not significantly so. And although, at his age, it wouldn’t show all that much, chances were...

...he checked between his legs...

~~~

Somewhere in Japan, in a small town of hot springs, a blue-haired, teenage girl who had been hanging the laundry blinked and looked down from the roof of the building she was standing on.

“Motoko-san, daijoubu desu ka?” She asked. [Are you all right, Miss Motoko?]

~~~

A tall, well-endowed, tanned and beautiful silver-haired woman reclined her chair in front of her console, sipping some Sake from a coffee cup. Said cup shattered when a scream echoed between the walls of the room she was in. With a sigh, she grumbled:

“I told Skuld installing Windows on Yggdrasil was a bad idea, but did she listen? Nooo...”

~~~

Far away, in a crystalline black and grey object, a long-eared, yellow eyed girl with a spiky mane of cyan hair looked up at the walls.

“Doushita no?” She asked at a bunch of floating crystals.

“Myaah!” They replied.

~~~

For those I have successfully lost, let's just say he, or rather *she*, screamed *really* loud.

“I’LL KILL HIM!!!” Harry Potter shrieked. “I’M GOING TO STRANGLE THAT LITTLE BASTARD!!”

Spider-Ron blinked eight times – once for each eye – then turned toward Hamster-Xu. The four-inch tall rodent-girl shrugged in response.

The newly girl-Harry flexed her hands, for once wishing she had nails to rip the Poltergeist apart.

Wisely, said troublemaker flew off for his unlife.

~~~

Draco, with his wand out, stalked the halls. While he hadn't shown it in front of his friends, he wanted to be *anywhere* but here. He *could* imagine few uses for the Jusenkyo powder, but the last thing he wanted was to be a test subject. After all, it would be almost criminal for the wizarding world if he wasn't able to father children with anything else but a spider or a cat.

"Dad will probably disown me if I'm stuck as an animal." He grumbled, not noticing the fast approaching and grinning Poltergeist behind him.

~~~

Blaise also had her wand out, ready to cast a spell to protect herself. Her eyes darted around for signs of unusual things. Moving portrait, normal. Stairway floating uselessly outside the window, normal. Spider running away and jumping out the window, normal.

...wait. No. Not normal.

The spider, I mean.

Puzzled, Blaise looked out the window, searching for the terrorized eight-legged creature. However, it seemed like it had vanished completely.

"Weird." She mumbled, before turning around to continue her search for Peeves...

...who had been a few inches behind her.

"*BOO!*"

SPLASH

~~~

Ginny Weasley had since long realized it had *not* been a good idea to separate. Or at least, it was not a good idea for her to go and wander in an area of the castle she had never visited before. She was

thoroughly and completely lost, and for the first time since the start of the year, wished she'd stumble even on her brothers. Especially the twins; they knew the school like their pockets – and perhaps better – or so she heard the rumors claim.

With a sigh, the red-haired girl sat down on a low-set windowsill, letting her back rest against the reinforced window. She closed her eyes and accorded herself a stretch and a yawn---

**\*SPLASH\***

And ended up with a mouthful of water...

~~~

"Where did he go?" Harry Potter wondered as she climbed yet another set of stairs. Usually, the size of Hogwarts made it a pleasure to explore. However, when searching for something or someone, it quickly became a handicap.

The animal menagerie following her was no help, either. Ron had discovered how to spin webs and was now doing his best to learn how to stop while trying to get his lower four legs to let go of it. Unfortunately, he had been on Hermione's back at the time, so the cat found herself with her back fur glued to the sticky thread. Xu had gone to help, but found herself unable to get off the solid and sticky problem. Ron's web was apparently very strong.

The result would have sent Harry into hysterics had she not been so furious.

'Separating was a bad idea.' She mused, frowning. 'I'd better get Blaise, Ginny and Draco before Peeves curses them, too.'

Ignoring Hermione's pained, whining meows, Harry turned the next corner without looking if there was something in the way.

A loud yelp came as her entire lower body came in contact with something furry, throwing off her balance and sending her sprawling on her back. Her wand was sent flying off, landing some distance ahead of her in a loud clatter.

Looking at what she had hit, she found herself face-to-face with the biggest dog she had ever seen. No. At that size, it could *only* be a wolf. It looked at her, yellow eyes unblinking, glittering with unknown intent, then, slowly, it got up, effortlessly pushing Harry's legs off its back in the process.

Harry had always had an aversion to dogs. Not surprising, after all, considering her "aunt" Marge's fascination for bulldogs or other aggressive species that liked nothing more than to try to eat him alive, or strand him up a tree until the latest ungodly hours of the day. She did not normally mind small dogs, whom she actually found sometimes cute. But big ones...

...and this one was the mother of all big dogs.

On her back, Harry flinched in fear. That monster was at least three-feet tall! And from the impact she felt when the wolf made a step forward, weighted a lot, too.

Its lips parted in an aggressive sneer. Its jaws opened. A row of impressive, white teeth appeared, along with a long, lolling, red tongue of something that had recently killed. Slowly, the mouth approached her head, apparently intent on crushing it and ending her life. Panicking, she flinched back until her back hit something. A metallic clang told her it was a statue. And the statue didn't seem too happy, either. Its metallic knees quaked with rust-squeaky clanking sounds.

'Oh merlin!!' She thought, looking at the approaching mouth. 'How the hell did that wolf get in here?!"

Thinking this would be her final thought, she closed her eyes...

SLURP

"GAK!!" The neo-girl shrieked, feeling the warm and wet contact of a tongue against her face. She tried to push the wolf away, but no avail. It was *much* too heavy.

That's when Harry noticed something; a whiff in the air.

It was the familiar aroma of strawberries, coming from the enormous canine's mouth.

"B-Blaise?!" She gasped in shock.

The girl-turned-wolf nodded, sitting down awkwardly. Now that she knew it was her friend, Harry could tell a few resemblances. The sneer he had seen on the wolf's lips was in fact a smirk, which he recognized, now. And the redness of the tongue was, she guessed, from the strawberry jam she had coated her ham with that morning. It had done a fearfully accurate impression of fresh blood, however.

Wiping her face with her sleeve then wiping the sleeve on the neo-wolf's fur coat, much to her annoyance, Harry got up, noting, with chagrin, that the she-wolf easily reached up to her chest.

"You do realize you scared the hell out of me." He noted flatly.

The wolf did not reply, but her tail twitched, as if it was just itching to wave and reveal her amusement. Scowling, Harry turned to the animal menagerie. All of them but Hermione were hidden behind the closest wall. The cursed cat's fur was puffed up in surprise and had apparently torn the spider threads apart, liberating the two smaller cursed students.

"Some friends you are." She sighed at Xu and Ron. The first looked ashamed – as ashamed as a Hamster could, that is – while the other didn't react. However, as reading facial expressions on a Spider is very hard, he could have been pulling his ton—pardon me—mandible at him, for all she knew. Hermione, on the other hand, had just torn herself from her frozen terror and gave a cattish smug look at the other two.

Xu scowled rather adorably. Ron... if he did something, it was unnoticeable. Perhaps he rolled his many eyes.

"Back to business." Harry sighed, turning to the wolf. "Can you find Draco and Ginny?"

The wolf gave her a "What do I look like, a search dog?!" look before sitting awkwardly on the cold stone tiles and shaking her head.

“W-Why?” The neo-girl asked, frowning. “Can’t you use your nose or something?”

Blaise, for an answer, growled. The opening and closing of her impressive jaws proved she wanted to speak the human way, but unfortunately her body would not cooperate. For the first time, Harry felt grateful she hadn’t got another – possibly more constricting – curse. At least she could still function normally, except in the bathroom.

“Oh... right, you’d need something of theirs...” Harry said, frowning. She had nothing of the sort on her. Possibly the only thing that had been given by someone else was her bandanna.

The cursed girl seemed to read his thoughts and let out a plaintive whine that sounded awfully authentic.

“Well, we’ll have to look for them the old-fashioned way.” The human sighed. This day was just getting better and better...

...perhaps if one was masochist.

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“Misters Weasley, what in the world...?” was the only thing that came to Professor McGonagall’s mind as she approached the scene, attracted by odd, sobbing sounds.

“We don’t know!” One of them, whom she recognized as Fred from the way his ears were slightly wider than his brother’s – after spending so much time with said ears listening to her rants about the importance of setting an example or of finally winning the cup from the Slytherins, one tends to notice things – declared.

“He just cracked as soon as he saw us!” The other, who was obviously George, added. “Poor git, think we’ve been too hard on him, Fred?”

“Definitely.” Fred replied.

McGonagall blinked. She could have sworn the other twin's mouth hadn't moved. Shrugging at what was obviously one of their attempts at getting a rise out of a member of the staff like they seemed to like so much to do – much to her dismay – she went and pulled Filch off the ground. To her surprise, however, the man was shaking, shaking his head a muttering about "Four of 'em..."

"Four of what?"

"I think he means us." Four voices declared from all over the room, including behind two columns that she could not see before. There were, in fact, four twins.

"What... the...Blazes..."

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Few floors above, a certain child-sized wolf sneezed loudly, lifting dust from the ground she had been sniffing, trying to catch a whiff of Draco's hair gel, which was, she guessed, the best way for her to find the aristocratic boy. In front of her, Harry was carrying Ron while Blaise had Xu on her back; because of their cursed form's diminutive sizes, could not quite keep up with the larger ones' paces. Hermione had stubbornly refused to be carried and looked like she was dearly regretting her decision, her long and rough tongue lolling as she panted in fatigue.

"Hey, look!" The only one able to talk said, pointing ahead, at an abandoned set of robes on the floor. Fearing the worst, the menagerie ran forwards.

The robes were quite obviously empty and bore the crest of Slytherin. Harry let out a sigh. Another of his friends had apparently been cursed and, if anything, it looked like another small curse. He was starting to lack room on her shoulders, and although she usually was not too bothered by spiders, Ron seemed to enjoy nothing more than to freak her out by trying to learn to walk on her face. Without much success; his legs kept slipping. Harry was eternally grateful.

Inspecting the robes further, she couldn't find anything else that would tell to whom they belonged.

"Any idea on who it is?" She asked Blaise, who shook her large head and shrugged, incidentally bobbing her whole body downwards in the process. Human movements were *not* made to be repeated in a wolf's.

"Meow." Hermione called as she strutted between them, walking to the robes. With a cautious and clawless paw, she turned over a sleeve and pointed at a dried spot of faded red on it, invisible against the black cloth apart from the few errand hair and dust that had glued on it. Curious, Harry brought the spot to her nose and sniffed.

"...Strawberry?" Harry asked, blinking and turning to Blaise, who shook her head, as if to say 'It's not mine'.

Ron's leg poked Harry's cheek. She ignored him.

"Meow!" Hermione called for attention again, huffing in a way much similar to her usual attitude, causing her fur to stand up and puff her shape until she looked like a large fur ball. More than she already did, anyway.

With her left paw, the girl-turned-cat slicked her hair backwards.

"Draco?" Harry guessed, suddenly remembering how, that morning, a piece of Blaise's jammed ham had been refused by Xu's stealth owl and stained the platinum-haired boy's robe. Once again, she marveled on how Hermione could remember so much information.

The cat nodded in reply, the left side of its chops lifting in what she supposed was a smirk. A smirk with sharp teeth and fangs that had Xu flinch away, obviously reminded of her current rodent status.

Ron's leg poked Harry's cheek again, harder. She, once again, ignored him.

"Great. He must have got himself cursed and ran off, trying to find us." The auburn-haired girl sighed. "Let's hope he hasn't turned into something too small... think there's a fly curse?"

Hamster-Xu shrugged, suddenly looking like something torn right out of a Doctor Doolittle movie.

Three of Ron's legs rammed against Harry's cheek. Irritated, she glared at the little arachnid.

"What do you want?"

For all answer, the spider pointed deeper down the hall with another of his legs. As much as he hated spiders, Ron was apparently getting used to controlling his new body.

Looking at the pointed direction, Harry found quite an unusual sight.

A fox and a ferret were apparently trying to pull a set of robes ahead. More precisely, the fox was trying to pull the robes while the ferret was trying to pull the fox away, without success. The former was quite larger than the latter.

Tentatively, Harry called: "Draco? Ginny?"

In order, the ferret and the fox looked up.

The latter had a bright, brilliant red fur that was typical to foxes, although not quite at that shade. Harry was almost tempted to call it orange. Its eyes were brown and had the same glittering quality as Ginny's. It was, quite obviously the Weasley girl, trying to pull her robes with her.

As for the former, the first thing that caught the eyes was the bright white fur coat and red eyes. Apparently, even if he was a rodent, he could not resist being unusual in his own way and pulled an act of albinism. Interesting tidbit, the fur on the top of the Ferret's head was carefully slicked back and obviously gelled. The result was very strange and altogether screamed out of Draco Malfoy.

Especially when said Malfoy spotted Harry's current 'complete-body-unintentional-drag-queen'istic predicament and burst out in mighty hysterics on a tone of voice worthy of a chipmunk.

"Har har, laugh it up, ferret." The neo-girl snapped irritably.

Taking her defense, Ginny strutted over to near Draco and sharply whacked the back of his head with a paw. He gave an irritated

squeak that was most likely a protest. Grateful, Harry picked her up, noting that the fox pulled her tongue at the albino.

"We'd better find a teacher." She said, frowning. "They'll know *some* way to catch Peeves. Maybe they'll even know a cure."

The animals around her nodded in agreement. Not that, if they disagreed, they would have been able to voice their opinions.

"If anyone knows a cure, it's professor Snape." She added, thinking of the various odd substances in glass jars that were displayed in his office and classroom.

Again, none of them answered, but she noticed Hermione's fur began to stand on end, Blaise flinched – nearly throwing Xu off her back – and Ron's eight eyes *might* have widened in horror.

They *did*, after all, use spiders in their potions.

Blaise soon found, much to her dismay, the painful wonders of climbing down stairs on four legs. Hermione had smartly decided to get in Harry's arms, sandwiching Draco between herself and Ginny. The heir of the ferret fortune was apparently sulking, his long neck hanging down on Harry's baggy sleeve. He was, after all, the smallest, between the four of them.

As for Xu and Ron, they had decided to stay on Blaise, since Harry's arms were full. They were still trying to get those pesky solar systems doing the Macarena out of their visions when they reached the ground level of the castle.

'Professor Snape went with Professor Sprout to get ingredients for the mandrake restorative draught,' she reminded herself as they searched for a way out. 'It wasn't too long ago, so he's probably still near the greenhouses.'

A quick look at the windows later, she frowned. The wind was blowing hard, pushing clouds of icy cold snow all over the grounds. She couldn't see this, however, since the falling blizzard barely let her see

the nearby north tower, from the top of which thick purple smoke was oozing.

In her distraction, she turned a corner and—

“Ooff!!”

--rammed into someone, sending herself falling on her butt, dropping the three cursed animals in her hands, causing indignant squeaks and barks.

‘Great work, clumsy!’ She chided herself. Seeking to apologize, she looked up... directly in the startled eyes of Professor Snape. A bag of herbs was floating behind him.

“Lily?!” He gasped.

Harry blinked. Did she really look *that* much like her mother? Shaking her head, she replied: “Wrong Potter.”

Confused, the teacher’s face froze, before turning into a frown of anger. “Who are you?”

“Harry Potter.” She replied, slipping off her bandanna and showing her lightning-bolt scar as a proof. “We have a bit of a problem here.”

“I... can see that.” The teacher said, looking at the transformed students. “How did this happen?”

“Well, you see...” Harry put her bandanna back on and launched herself in a long explanation punctuated by agreeing barks, whines, squeaks and meows at key moments. When she was finished, Snape simply nodded.

“So your friends and yourself were transformed by Peeves, who is using highly dangerous cursed waters imported from China by Miss Chang, who is the hamster hiding behind your leg, Miss Potter?”

A startled and nervous squeak came from said rodent.

“Yes, and it’s still *mister* Potter.” She corrected a bit irritably.

“Pardon me.” Snape said with a sigh, rubbing his temples with a hand, muttering to himself.

Harry was a bit surprised. She had expected more than simple comprehension from the teacher – perhaps doubt, perhaps surprise and at least a bit of suspicion. But he seemed to take it all in stride, as if such a thing was normal. Perhaps it was because her new form looked surprisingly like her mother used to, but she doubted it.

She also noticed he was deliberately avoiding looking directly in her hazel eyes.

“Well, I have no idea what the cure might be, but you were wise in coming to get me. The only solution would be to catch Peeves, but doing so requires special spells that are not yet taught at Hogwarts for reasons that I still ignore.”

Harry nodded, wondering the same thing. If a spell to repel the Poltergeist was taught here, Peeves would be much less dangerous.

“In any case, I suggest you and—”

“Professor!” The familiar voice of Lockhart called. Harry saw Snape’s hands clench and vanish underneath his long sleeves. The blonde was completely oblivious, running up to them, out of breath, but still managing a feeble grin. “Finally... caught up with you... blasted moving staircase... lost track—”

“Yes, a pity.” The black-haired man retorted with dripping sarcasm.

Catching his breath, Lockhart grinned more strongly, plucking the floating bag from mid-air. “My offer still stands, Professor. I’ve made this potion hundreds of times, as I told you, and—”

“And I recall hearing that a certain third year Hufflepuff nearly knocked out my predecessor when messing up a simple Swelling Solution.” He drawled in a way of strict refusal.

From the indignant and embarrassed blush appearing on Lockhart’s face, Harry guessed who Snape had been talking about. She barely stifled a laugh.

Unfortunately, she did not stifle it enough, since Lockhart noticed her.
“And who is this lovely young lady?”

Harry stopped laughing, a sudden chill coursing through her back.

“Um... uh...” She stuttered, not wanting *him* to know about this. It would be much, much too dangerous – imagine he decides he knows the cure?! “Ha...Hailey.” She replied nervously.

“So nervous... Ah, yes, in awe of me, aren’t you? Don’t worry, I don’t bite.” He said while blinding Harry with his teeth. The neo-girl openly sneered, shuddering in disgust.

“The young *lady* you are talking about is actually Ha--- cursed *male* student.”

The neo-girl felt *very* grateful that her teacher had not revealed her name.

The blonde blinked and looked closely at her, trying to guess who she was. Harry didn’t let him, pulling her bangs down over her bandanna and looking away. With a sudden sound of realization, Lockhart pulled away.

“Ah yes, a *Gender Bender* malediction... I’ve seen one or two in my travels. Nasty thing, those, especially on someone as young as you.” He declared, taking out his wand. “I know the cure—”

“IT’SOK!!” Harry quickly interrupted, not wanting to screw her chances of ever being a boy again. “I... uh... don’t mind.”

Chipmunk-style laughter informed him that Draco was now laughing his albino head off while rolling on the floor, along with a cute and indignant bark from Ginny who was, once again, defending her. Hermione let out a meow that sounded very much like her trademark: “Honestly...”

Lockhart blinked, oblivious, and shrugged, pocketing his wand.

“It’s your choice, girl. It’s your choice.”

Harry resisted the urge to do the unmanly action digging her knee in the fool's groin. It was a close call, though. Draco's laughter reached another level of squeakiness his tiny paws rolled up into makeshift fists and hitting the floor in hilarity, at least until Ginny put a clawed paw on his tail, causing the laughs to turn into a pained squeak. The little orange fox couldn't do a thing about the huge wolf literally howling in laughter, however.

"And the others? More cursed students?" The blonde professor asked, pointing at the various animals.

Blaise stopped laughing immediately. Draco paled further. Xu scampered behind the wolf's paw, imitated by Ron, who tripped on a bunch of his legs and fell flat on his face, although it wasn't really noticeable. Ginny let out a yelp and took a step back, tail between her legs, apparently forgetting she was a *fox* and not a *dog*. As for Hermione, she looked down at the floor. Had she been human, she would have blushed in embarrassment.

"We have an expert on transfiguration in this school; I was simply bringing them to her." Snape lied smoothly, apparently not wanting his students to be turned into platypuses either.

"Anything she can do, *I* can as well!" Lockhart said, grinning and taking out his wand...

...just as a sinister cackling came. A very familiar cackling, echoing between the cold stone walls and into their ears.

"Peeves!" She gasped, spotting the Poltergeist approaching quickly, his arms full of buckets, evidently full of cursed waters, some of them dripping.

Snape's wand was out of his sleeve in an instant – Harry hadn't even seen him move – and pointed at Peeves. Lockhart was gaping, apparently trying to decide whether to hide or run away.

"*Phasma Funis!*" Snape cast loudly. A long, transparent rope whipped out of his wand, heading straight for the Poltergeist, who had to flip out of the way to dodge it, accidentally sending an armful of buckets

falling all over the floor in a loud metallic clang, harmlessly emptying their content all over the floor.

With his free hand, Peeves grabbed the first bucket on his other arm and launched it toward the two adults, while the various cursed students ducked for cover behind the nearest obstacle they could find – in some cases, each other.

Snape lifted his wand and quickly cast a shielding charm, but Lockhart was nowhere as lucky. Gaping like a fish out of water, his face like a deer's in the headlights, he stood stupidly, wand in his hand but inactive, as the water approached... and drenched him from head to toe. His purple robe folded in on itself, shrinking until it was barely two feet tall. The shield around the black-haired professor flickered brightly, almost blindingly, as if it was having difficulty stopping the highly cursed fluid.

And Peeves flew away, cackling madly. Quickly, Snape took aim.

“*Reducto!*”

The spell took form of a bright blue lightning bolt that moved blindingly fast – even someone who knew it was coming would have no chance of dodging it. Unfortunately, it didn't hit Peeves.

“Missed me, missed me, now ya gotta kiss me!” The Poltergeist mock-chanted, patting his butt and pulling his tongue at a... smirking Snape.

“I most certainly did *not* miss.” He said, pointing the buckets.

“Eh?”

One of the buckets was shining a brilliant yellow color, as if it was being super-heated, and shaking violently with increasing intensity, sending dangerous drops falling to the floor.

“Oh fu—” Was all he could say before it brilliantly exploded, splashing the walls, the floor, the ceiling and Peeves himself with its water. In his shock, he let go of the other buckets, which fell to the floor with a

loud clatter, spilling their content harmlessly. A drenched shape fell to the floor in a dull and floppy thud.

For a moment, there was stunned silence. Even Snape was stumped.

“...Xu, you said each spring had something that drowned in it, right?” Harry asked, giving the Hamster hiding in Blaise’s mane a look.

She nodded in answer.

“Then explain to me how a *squid* can drown!” She asked, pointing at Peeves’ new shape, who was flailing his new tentacles pitifully, as if wondering how to control them; two of them even rammed into his squishy body accidentally.

Xu shrugged and shook her fury, mustached head, indicating she had no idea either.

“He did not have the box.” Snape noted. “He must have left it somewhere behind, probably empty. With a little luck, he left the bags in it.”

“He left a trail, too.” Harry noted, pointing at the drips that had leaked from the top of the buckets and formed a trail on the floor. Snape nodded.

“Meow?” They heard Hermione call as she prodded the bundle of purple robes that were Lockhart’s with a clawless paw.

Curious of what Lockhart had turned into, Harry went to peek through the neck hole, but a long, light brown furred hand came out before she could make a step. Slowly, Lockhart’s new form peeled the robes off him, revealing...

...a small, light brown furred, blue-eyed monkey.

With a dramatic gesture, Lockhart wiped his forehead with an arm twice longer than usual, giving a grin that was rather terrifying with his monkeyish mismatched teeth.

"Woo?" He asked, looking at their stunned faces, wondering why they were looking at him like that.

Then, he looked down at the path of water on the floor.

"WOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!!!"

Few minutes later, with a levitated and tied up Peeves in the lead, trailed by the Poltergeist's levitator, Snape, the group was following the path of drips in the corridors. Once or twice, they had to find some way around a wall or a floor that the ghost had passed through. Twice, they found themselves backtracking up the trail – he had taken a random course, making it hard to know which way was the right one upon reaching the path again.

As they reached the sixth floor, however, they stumbled on not two, but four distraught-looking Weasley twins, who were followed by a small brown bulldog with small square glasses on its snout.

"Professor!" All four said at the exact same time, causing a confusing effect of stereo, identical distraught and scared expressions on their faces – probably from stumbling on the one teacher that was likely to be given the award for the highest number of point loss to Gryffindor.

"What in the... you have been cursed as well?!" Snape said, looking at them. "And who is the dog?"

Said canine growled angrily at Snape, eyes thinning in a familiar-looking glare.

"Ah, never mind. I have my answer." Snape said with a small smirk. "Aren't you a cat, usually, Professor?"

Harry blinked in surprise, looking more closely at the dog. Sure enough, if one looked for them, there were few similarities between the dog and McGonagall, the most obvious one being the ugly mass of fur set in an attempt of a loose bun on the back of her head. The glasses were hers as well, although on a much smaller scale. She

had probably shrunk them or transfigured a new pair on the spot to be able to see – that is, if the cursed animals could do magic.

Meanwhile, the twins had since long seen them and were now trying to guess who was who. Strangely enough, they found Ron on the first try, especially when the little spider attempted to show them a fist. Hermione was also easy to guess, mostly because her hair was as puffy as her hairball-cursed form's fur.

When they saw Harry, however, they had a bit more difficulty.

"Never seen her around here before," One of them said as all four inspected her closely, looking directly in her face. Flinching away, Harry lowered her bangs over her bandanna, hoping they wouldn't see it...

...forgetting that trying to hide something while someone is looking is a sure-fire way of getting it found.

"...POTTER?!" One of the four exclaimed, blinking.

Harry allowed herself an irritated groan as the Weasley quadruplets burst out laughing.

Meanwhile, Snape had effortlessly picked up bulldog!McGonagall, causing her to growl in embarrassment. Her new shape was only about one foot long, white with black spots, compactly built with a tiny, almost absent tail.

"Was Peeves carrying a box when he cursed you?" He asked.

The dog gave him a look, before shaking her head.

"That means the box is further down the trail." He concluded. "Which way did he come from?"

McGonagall nudged her muzzle at the right, where the trail continued and turned a corner. Nodding, he set her down on the floor on all

fours and started to walk, signaling for the others to follow him, which they did.

"How did you get your hair so *so~ft!*" One of the Freds or Georges teased Harry in a high-pitched tone.

"My, how much did your *dress* cost you?" Another added in the same tone.

Harry sneered and almost noted out loud that they were dressed similarly, but another twin had interrupted his thoughts.

"Hey, what's a cute *girl* like you doin' all alone like this?" He asked with a false and exaggerated "macho-on-the-hunt" air.

Harry flinched, this time. She *really* hoped she'd get cured; she didn't want to end up having to handle *that*. Ginny seemed to agree with him, as she leaped from the ground to Blaise's back, and up directly in one of her brothers' face, growling cutely all the way.

"A Feisty Fox, that." One of the quadruplets noted.

"Temper, red-hair and Harry-worship problem," Another listed with a smirk, "that's Ginny."

The twin currently on the ground had lifted the fox off his face, and was now smirking.

"What would mom think about this? I mean... you turning into a fox and all—" He was interrupted with said canine planted her teeth in his thumb, causing him to let go and release the cursed girl, who in turn bounced on his face before striding victoriously away from her bothers.

"If you are quite finished with this idiocy," Snape icily stated, "you would know that I have found the box."

Hopeful, Harry turned to him. Sure enough, in his left hand was a familiar purple box with torn duct tape around it. The lid was missing

and, inside, there were a dozen of empty Instant Jusenkyo powder bags.

It was over; they were going to be cured.

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“I hate Chinese.” Harry sighed as she sat down on a chair, in Professor Snape’s potion classroom. Around her, the animals bore the same despaired and hopeless looks. Xu looked quite frustrated, standing as she was on top of Snape’s desk.

The inscriptions holding the secret of the cure for the instant Jusenkyo powder were on the back of the bags, indeed. However, the only person able to read them was Xu, simply because it was all in Chinese. And since none of them were Hamstermouts, there was no way for the girl to tell them how.

“Maybe miss Chang can still show us the cure,” Snape said, taking out a piece of parchment, a quill and an inkpot. Understanding what he wanted, Xu revealed her impressive rodent teeth in a smile.

Unfortunately, as soon as he opened the inkpot, the Asian hamster gagged, covering her nose. Blaise did as well, her tail going between her legs with enough force to sent Ginny, who had been underneath her, tumbling forward, falling on top of Draco. However, Blaise didn’t fall on her back in a faint.

“Xu?” Harry asked, poking the hamster-cursed girl, who didn’t react.

“The smell must have been too strong for her.” Snape supposed, frowning.

“Great job,” One of the quadruplets chimed. “You just knocked out our translator.”

"Five points from Gryffindor for your insolence, Weasley." The teacher noted in an absent voice, as if removing points from them had become an instinct for him. "I guess there's only one thing left for me to do."

"Which is...?" Another twin asked.

"Find the antidote myself." He said, browsing through the bags. Unfortunately, all of them were empty and, therefore, useless. "That bloody Poltergeist! He wasted it all!"

"Perhaps you could have tried a translation spell against the back of the bags, Severus." A familiar voice said as Albus Dumbledore walked in, some snowflakes still hanging to his white beard. "The nature of some oriental magicks can be as different from ours as night and day."

"Professor, Peeves—"

"I am aware of the situation, thank you, Severus." He said while picking up one of the bags. With one hand, he re-adjusted his glasses and read.

"You can read Chinese, sir?" Harry asked in surprise.

"Nope," Dumbledore said, before pointing at another set of symbols underneath. The other set was less fancy than the first, with some of them formed of only one or two twisted lines. "I can read Japanese, however, thanks to my *miko* friend and that half-demon husband of hers."

"Oh." Harry wittingly stated, thoroughly lost. The look on Snape's face was no less confused.

"Does it say what the cure is?" She asked.

"Indeed." Dumbledore said, smiling at her and pointing at two symbols. "*Atsumi*. Hot water reverses it. It says that the Instant Jusenkyo powders give one-time only curses. Therefore, you will not turn into a girl again, Harry."

After spluttering at being discovered so quickly, Harry felt an instant feeling of giddy relief. The cure had been so simple! At any time, anyone of them could have just turned on the tap and turned back to their normal shapes. In her glee, she let out a sound; a high-pitched, musical laugh that was *not* meant to be done by males.

Horrified, Harry gasped: "I did *not* just giggle!"

More chipmunk and wolfish laughter came to her ears to answer her, much to her embarrassment.

"Well then, here's your antidote." Snape took out his wand and, suddenly, a spray of hot water, causing everyone to return to their original shapes. Unfortunately, except for Harry and the quadruplets, none of them had been wearing *any* clothes at the time.

Xu instantly woke up and shrieked, stumbling off the desk and landing in a heap on the floor.

Ginny blushed so red her hair seemed to turn pale.

Ron's language gained a few colors, while his face and ears favored red.

Draco simply blinked, already halfway hidden by a desk.

Blaise ducked behind the open door.

Peeves quickly escaped through the roof, fully clothed, thankfully.

Lockhart grinned hesitatingly and hid himself behind the teacher's desk.

Hermione gawped in the direction of the teacher's desk with an expression of disappointment on her face while mumbling about shorter than believed objects, before she "eep!"ed and covered herself with her hands.

McGonagall quickly turned into a cat to spare herself the embarrassment.

Harry laughed his head off.

So did the quadruplets

...Eh?

“Oops, I seem to have been missing some details...” Dumbledore noted, eyes twinkling in amusement, while waving his wand and causing robes to appear in thin-air. He then turned toward the four twins, who were looking at each other with grins on their faces. “And what do we have here?”

“Spring of drowned twins is different,” Xu replied while pulling on her robes over her head. “Need skin contact with other self while hot water touch.”

“And how would you know?” Snape asked, giving her a look. “I seem to remember someone didn’t know about the cures beforehand.”

Xu took the bag she had been reading as a hamster. “That Shuanshontsuniichuan, spring of drowned twins powder. It what hit them. Says cure on back.”

“So now we only have to tell which ones are Freds and which ones are Georges.” Ron said, fully clothed.

“I’m Fred.” One of them said.

“Uh? I thought you were George!” another said, looking at him.

“I’m not George, *you* are!” The first said.

“No I’m not.” The second corrected.

“We’re both Georges.” A third one said, pointing at the fourth and himself.

“Uh? I’m not George.” The fourth said.

“Well, I’m not Fred.” The second one said.

“Did you say you weren’t George?” The third one asked him.

"Yeah," The second one replied with a grin and a wink, "so what?"

"Then who are you?" The first one asked.

"I'm Gred." The second replied.

"And I'm Forge." The fourth quipped.

"Oh *stop it!*" Ginny snapped, walking up to them, dividing them in pairs of two and forcing each pairs to take their hands while glaring at each of them.

"Freds," She glared at the right, "And Georges," this time at the left, "If you don't stop playing around like this, I'm gonna tell mum and you'll be sorry!"

The four gawped at her and didn't react when Snape launched more hot water at them. Two of the twins vanished in a puff of smoke, their clothes falling to the floor and transfiguring back into stones in the process.

"How..." Fred started,

"Could..." George continued,

...and the two waited, before blinking and looking about, as if trying to find their "twins" to finish their sentence. When they saw they were cured, they gave a groan and clicked their fingers in disappointment.

"How did you guess?" Harry asked, impressed.

"You have no idea how much trouble one can avoid if they know how to tell them apart." Ginny replied. "Besides, I'm their *favorite* sister... not that they have a choice."

"If that is all," Snape loudly said, "I'd like to have my classroom back."

"And forty points from Slytherin for bringing such dangerous materials in the school, Chang!" McGonagall snapped angrily as she strode out the door, followed by a Lockhart who, for once in his life, was not

wearing something in colors that would have been welcome in a hippie convention, but not anywhere else.

Harry winced, turning to Blaise as they left the room. “I think that gets us behind Ravenclaw.”

The girl nodded while Draco smirked. “We’ll just have to make Ravenclaw lose a few points once the students come back.”

“Miss Chang,” They heard Snape call from inside the classroom to the girl following them.

“Y-Yes?” She asked nervously.

“For giving me the pleasure of seeing Lockhart turned into a baboon, forty points to Slytherin.”

Xu grinned and nodded. “*Xie xie ni*, Professor!”

~~~~~

“So, what do you all think?”

Hermione’s question broke the silence that came over the assembled students as they rested from the day’s events in their usual disused classroom. Ron wasn’t there, having high-tailed it away from Hermione, Harry, Blaise, Ginny, Draco and especially Xu, as if she still had a bit of Zhizhunichuan water to use on him. It was the first time the Chinese girl entered their hanging out spot. She didn’t seem very impressed, though. Unsurprising, considering the only decorating they had done was dropping a Bertie Bott’s Every Flavor Bean or Chocolate frog box on the floor every now and then.

“It was fun,” Ginny said, her hand digging into Blaise’s bag of every flavor beans while the older girl wasn’t looking, “except when I turned into a fox.”

“Can no believe there spring of drowned *hamster*.” Xu muttered darkly.

"Being a girl sucked." Harry put in flatly, before glaring at Draco's snicker. "What about you, Ferret?"

"I'll agree with you, but not on the sucking part." He replied with a teasing grin, causing Harry to groan in annoyance. "I never want to be a Ferret again in my life." He gave a derisive snort. "Then again, what are the odds..."

"Being a wolf was weird... I felt like some werewolf," Blaise said with a shudder, foolishly popping a bean in her mouth without sampling it. A second later, she winced at the taste and expertly spat it out, hitting the side of the trash can, adding another colorful decoration to the floor. "Ew, doggie treat."

"I say it was... interesting. And quite educative." Hermione noted.

"You would find something educative in being turned into a cat." Draco drawled lazily.

Glaring at him, she continued: "I wonder in which way being an Animagus is different from the instant Jusenkyo powder..."

"Ani what?" Harry asked, puzzled.

"A wizard that turns into an animal at will... kind of like McGonagall." Draco replied, stealing one of Blaise's beans, to her annoyance. It was red, too. "Maybe you could ask her, Granger."

"I no think she want be reminded." Xu said, blushing. "I very sorry. No think stupid tricky ghost steal box."

"Forgiven," Ginny said, grinning and patting her friend in the back.

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "We *did* see Lockhart turned into his true self, thanks to you."

Ginny, Blaise and Draco snorted and Xu blushed at that, while Hermione huffed in anger.

"It wasn't funny! What if the cure had been harder to find? Would you imagine spending the rest of the school year as a *girl*, Harry?"

'Below the belt...' Harry winced.

"And what was that Professor Lockhart said, *lovely lady?*" Hermione added, causing Harry to glare at her.

"We're being a bad influence on her." Blaise noted, eyeing the bushy-haired girl's victorious grin.

"What was your first clue?" Draco asked, munching on the bean he had snitched. It tasted like chicken. 'Course, he didn't really know what it was, but as long as it tasted fine... right...?

~~~~~

Somewhere deep in the confines of the school, in a certain dungeon classroom, Professor Snape was doing something that was perhaps his trademark to anyone who wasn't a Slytherin. He scowled. And the person he was scowling at had been a Gryffindor, over a century ago, that is.

"You knew what was happening." It was not a question, nor was it an accusation.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. "Perhaps I did, perhaps I did not. What are your proofs?"

"You leave suddenly just as miss Chang gets her box, letting Peeves have his way around the school. I *know* you have the owls she receives filtered, and you probably have asked her mother about Jusenkyo. You walk in the school *just* when it's all over and we seek the cure, you head directly in my classroom even though nobody saw us go there to tell you and the only ones that could have 'informed you of the situation' were myself and Mister Potter, and neither of us had seen eye or beard of you for the whole day. Is that enough?"

"Hmm... your evidence is pretty circumstantial," Dumbledore replied with a bright twinkle in his eyes. "but I admit that yes, I knew. It was a very entertaining day, wasn't it?"

Stumped, Snape could do nothing more than stare at the old man, having expected any other answer but that.

"Why?" He simply asked, mostly because it was the only thought in his mind at the moment.

The old man grinned. "That... is a secret."

Snape's stare turned into an annoyed glare. "Oh stop that. Please. The last thing I want is for *him* to—"

"I assure you, last I heard, he was currently far away, in every possible sense." Dumbledore replied, eyes twinkling merrily. "Besides, you have to admit that he certainly brought a ray of life to the castle."

"He conned Lily into dancing in a black and yellow mini-skirt on the Gryffindor table, Dumbledore. She was so humiliated she didn't come out of her dorms for a week, until Zabini got fed up and blasted the door to dust. I *hardly* call that bringing life *anywhere*."

Snape could have sworn Dumbledore's lips twisted into an honest *smirk*. "I seem to recall a certain Slytherin boy cheering her along..."

"Shut up." He muttered, hoping his blush wasn't too apparent. From the infuriating way Dumbledore chuckled, he guessed it was.

Damnit. It was little wonder why You-know-who wanted to kill that man.

Fortunately, Dumbledore complied, simply staring at the younger teacher, who had picked up the box and bags and thrown them in the fire. For fifteen full minutes, neither of them moved. It was something of a private game between the two of them. The goal was *not* to be the first one to speak. And while Snape was a patient man, there was hardly any day he won.

And this day was no different.

With a sigh, Snape rubbed his temples in defeat, before giving the old man a glare. "Is there anything you wish to add?"

"I am not one of your students you can dismiss at any time, Severus." Dumbledore reminded good-naturedly. "I *did*, however, notice something."

An eyebrow lifted on Severus' face.

"She looked a lot like her, didn't she."

It wasn't a question, and there was no need to point out names.

Severus nodded with a sigh. "I've noticed... but..."

"But...?" Dumbledore pressed.

"But she had his blasted eyes!" Severus snapped angrily, his hand clenching in a fist. "What *is it* with that boy and reminding me of *that*?! Even when he's not in his own *body*, he does!"

"He is their child," Dumbledore replied calmly. "And he acts more like the two of them every day. More her than him, though. He was never one for thinking things through."

Snape let out a snarl and stubbornly turned to the fireplace, in which the box had begun to lose its shape. For a moment, both men looked at the dancing flames, silent. The game had started anew, on a common and unheard signal. Without a sound, the Potion master took a poker and moved one of the logs, causing brilliant sparks to flood upwards.

The crackling of the fire seemed to intensify from the silence, as if it was trying to fill up the air with as much sound as it could, to make up for their own quietness. A long, twisted red flame licked against the blackened cardboard, shriveling it up further and peeling the purple paper away.

"Now that you have made your peace with the past," Dumbledore broke the silence, just loud enough to be heard over the soft blowing roar of the fire, "you'll have to let go of it, Severus."

Before walking through the door, though, he gave a final look at the younger teacher, over his shoulder. "Just remember, my tower is always open."

Few minutes later, Severus Snape was in his classroom, with no other company than the burning logs and slowly vanishing purple

duct-taped box and the remains of empty instant Jusenkyo bags. He had won that game, yet he knew that, in the end, he had been beaten.

He gave a dry chuckle. Only Dumbledore could do something like that. Perhaps this lesson, perhaps the adventures of the day had been the old man's carefully manipulated plan, simply to give him this message...

...or, more likely, their headmaster was going senile in his old age.

**THIS CHAPTER IS DEDICATED TO RAN HOSHINO,  
BETWEEN HERE AND THERE, SHAUN GARIN AND BF110C4,  
WHO MANAGED TO CATCH ALL OF LAST CHAPTER'S CAMEOS**  
^\_-

...hmm... maybe I should have put a few more... dunno if people would have caught Sanzan eyes references, hehe...

### **Chapter 15: Knowledge is power. Power is life.**

Harry woke up to the bright light of the sun, filtering through the deep green curtains of his bed. His body still felt groggy and didn't want to move away from the comforting warmth of his blankets. His mind felt hazy, as if he had barely slept.

The thing was: he *had* barely slept.

Their adventures the previous day, involving him taking a temporary touch with his feminine side, had caused him no end of twisting in his sleep. What if Dumbledore hadn't read the bags correctly and he would end up turning into a girl again? What if the Japanese translation Dumbledore had read wasn't accurate?

The result had been no end of twisting and turning in his bed before he finally managed to go to sleep. Nemesis hadn't helped at all, rolled up as he was around the curtain-holding bars. After hearing a short resume of the day, he had planted a disgusting idea in Harry's head, involving his girl form – older, that is – ropes and a snake-tail.

"Rise and shine, Hailey!" Draco's taunting drawl came through his curtains, a second before they ripped away, allowing the sun coming through the thin windows to aim directly in his eyes.

Although he had himself been cursed in a Ferret and definitely hadn't enjoyed it, the day would evidently remain in Draco's memories for a

long, long time, if only to tease “Hailey” and “Peter”, name given to Ron originally by Blaise and adopted by the Malfoy heir, although he had absolutely no idea where it came from, having never heard of Spider-man.

“Lemmee alon’...” Harry groaned, twisting away from the light, snuggling deeper in the blanket.

“Aren’t you the lively one today.” Blaise said dryly, pushing the curtains on the other side open, ridding Harry of his final protection against the world of wakefulness.

With an annoyed growl, Harry sat up quickly, scowling at the two offenders of the sacred law of sleep. Apparently, they were paying him back for his cheerful demeanor of yesterday.

“What time ‘zit?” He asked, yawning.

“Late enoufff.” Nemesis hissed, sliding down the pole, just in front of Draco, who paled and took a step back.

“Late enough.” Blaise replied immediately after.

Harry blinked and sighed. “Great, in stereo.” He grumbled.

“Not my fffault.” “Eh?” Nemesis and a confused Blaise replied.

“Never mind.” He let out another yawn and rubbed his eyes, attempting to jump-start his brain. “Why are you lot so bloody chipper this morning?”

“Christmas.” Draco replied.

“Ah, right.” The black-haired boy said, allowing himself another wide-mouthed yawn. Then, in the middle of it, his brain finally found the ‘on’ switch, causing his mouth to lock up and close painfully in a bone-on-bone clacking sound. “Christmas!?”

“You know... presents, party, fun, the reason why there’s no classes now, family gathering, feast, religious celebration... although nobody seems to remember that part...”

"Rings any bells?" Draco asked with a smirk, poking Harry's head with a mouth-made and rather long: "Dong".

"Yeah, yeah." Harry replied, stretching. "I'm up, I'm up. Blaise, would you mind leaving?"

Blaise gave him a look. "Why?"

"I need to get dressed."

"So?"

*"Blaise!!"*

The girl gave a snickering giggle – a rather interesting sound to hear – and quickly strode away.

The common room was different, that day. The dreary stone walls and brightly burning fireplace had not changed, nor had the tall green streamers with the Slytherin blazon on them moved. The dark green couches still looked as inviting as the previous day and the air was still as chillingly cold, albeit the roaring fire helped give a bit of warmth to the occupants.

In the middle of the room, however, was the difference. A truckload of presents had been magically dropped, with few of them already open by Blaise Draco, Ginny and Xu, who were already there. The short Asian girl was tearing apart the yellow wrapping paper covering a box as Harry climbed down the stairs.

"If it's more Jusenkyo powder, I'm going to send a dungbomb to your uncle." He heard Ginny vow.

"It not, promise." Xu said, looking at the box. "Beside, it from Emma."

"Really?" Ginny, now more curious than before, leaned forward to take a closer look.

Before Harry could see what it was, Blaise walked up to him and pushed a small, rectangular box into his hands.

"Here you go, that's from mum."

"For me?" Harry asked, more out of habit than anything else. After ten years of being ignored or hated at the Dursleys, any sign of being liked or welcome came as a surprise, even after two years of intensive stay in the wizarding world.

"I don't think there's any other Harry Potters in here, is there?" Blaise teased with a toothy grin. "C'mon, open up, it's written there's something for me in it."

Harry noticed the ripped piece of Muggle tape still attached to the box, and the open letter in Blaise's hand, where a bit of Mrs Zabini's slightly scrawny calligraphy could be seen. With a shrug, he tore more tape from the paper, rather slowly. Too slowly, in the girl's opinion, as she ripped the box from his hands and tore the paper off in one single sweep.

Inside the box were two smaller rectangular wooden cases with leather bands attached to them. Both were light, apparently empty, with identical holes at one end. Harry also noticed that one of them was a tiny bit longer than the other, but only by about a quarter of an inch.

"Wicked... thanks mum!" Blaise said, taking the bigger case and handing Harry the letter in the process. Curious at what the odd present was, Harry read to himself:

*Blaise and Harry,*

*Since you're going to be learning how to Duel, I figured I might as well give you two a present that will help out at that. Those are wand cases. The leather band will stretch so you can wear it on your hips or on your wrists. Personally, I prefer the hips, but that's just me.*

*They used to belong to me, but after my first wand stopped working, I didn't have a use for them. I hope you'll both like them. Of course, I*

*had to enlarge Blaise's. Never quite got to 11½, I'm afraid. The smaller one is yours, Harry. Don't be greedy, yours is smaller.*

*Love, Elmira*

Tying up the holster to his wrist, Harry re-read the letter and frowned:

"What does she mean, 'After my first wand stopped working'?" he asked, his hand unconsciously clenching around the holly wood on his pocket, which gave a comforting wave of warmth at his touch.

"Sometimes people's wands stop working." Draco replied while scavenging the pile for a box with his name. "It just means that it no longer fits the user."

"No longer fits?" Harry repeated, looking dubiously at his own trusty wand, which felt warm to his touch, as if responding to his feelings. "How can a wand 'no longer fit' a wizard?"

"Take for example... oh I don't know..." Draco sighed. "I've never actually heard of it happening to someone around me, so I wouldn't know. I suppose it's rather rare." Then, with a sudden grin, the boy bent down and picked up a rather floppy bag that bore his name.

"I did," Ginny replied. "Charlie's wand stopped working when he finished school and decided to chase dragons in Romania. Ron's using it, actually."

Draco snorted, earning himself a glare from the taller, but younger Slytherin.

"Shut up, Malfoy. Not everyone lives in a manor and can afford to buy half a dozen million things."

As if to prove her point, Draco's present ended up being a rather rich-looking silk cloak that was too flimsy to be worn anywhere but great occasions, at the risk of being torn apart. Ginny gave him a glare, which he responded with a brilliant and mocking smirk, while parading in his cloak.

Harry received a box of Treacle fudges – which were left in the box – from Hagrid, and a toothpick from the Dursleys, along with a beautiful picture of a sunset by the ocean, which they said was the view from their villa, quote the letter: “*That you'll never set foot in even if it's the last piece of ground on earth*”.

“Charming person.” Xu noted darkly and sarcastically upon reading over Harry’s shoulder.

“That’s my uncle. Can we switch?” Harry asked in faked hopefulness.

“Only if you want dip in real Nyannichuan.” Xu replied good naturedly.

“Nya-what?” Draco blinked.

“Spring of drowned girl.” Xu replied with a smirk. “Uncle say want meet Hailey.”

“NO WAY!” Harry snapped over every other Slytherins’ laughs.

The decorations had been lit brightly in celebration of the day. It was hard to tell which part of the great hall was the brightest: The glittering Christmas tree, lit with a thousand *real* candles that magically did not burn the tree, a silvery ribbons hanging across the room, reflecting the brilliant mid-morning sunlight, or that rather flashy white and gold robe that Lockhart had decided to attire himself into.

The table was full of rich and very appetizing festive foods, which the teachers were already tucking in when the five Slytherins walked in. The four Gryffindors were already there – Hermione chatting animatedly with Professor Sprout in a debate about cross-bred plants, Ron trying to make Hooch understand that the cannons would *finally* win this year while she retorted that the Holyhead harpies would take them out easily and Fred and George *trying* to look innocent as McGonagall glared at them, most likely because the two tricksters had done some infringement to the rules.

"Ah, there you are!" Dumbledore said with a grin, completely ignoring the few green peas stuck in his beard. "I was starting to wonder if we'd have to send Severus to fetch you lot."

Said professor gave a somber sigh and swallowed another mouthful of meat pie. He looked like he wished he was *anywhere* but where he was. Perhaps the fact that Lockhart was standing just in front of him, grinning while trying to catch the attention of a pretty woman that Harry didn't know wasn't helping. Since the cover book she was reading was covered in a single and exceptionally long and complicated formulae that gave him a headache just by looking at it, he guessed she taught something like mathematics, if wizards studied it.

She was also thoroughly ignoring Lockhart, which proved she actually was intelligent.

Harry served himself some of the food available on the table while the rest of his friends sat down around him – Draco in front, Blaise at his left, Xu at his right with Ginny in front of her. They did likewise, as the levitating jar of strawberry jam revealed, foretelling the soon inundation of the sticky garniture all over foods that were not intended for it. Absentmindedly, he listened to the conversations around him, which was starting to become a bad habit of his.

"All this... genetic engineering and crossbreeding thing feels a bit wrong to me." Sprout was telling Hermione. "I mean, imagine if someone mixed a mundane flower with a devil's snare. You get close to it and chop!" She clapped her hands loudly for effect, "you're plant food."

"I'm telling you!" Ron began again, while Hooch listened amusedly, "they have the best lineup they've had in at least three decades, with Calder as lead chaser; it's going to be a cannon victory for sure!"

"And thirty years ago, they suffered their worst defeat, didn't they?" Hooch said, smirking. "890-10, if I remember? *Against the harpies*, might I add?"

Embarrassed, Ron grumbled his answer.

Harry chuckled a bit, seeing the Weasley boy's ears color. He was wearing a maroon wool jumper, apparently hand-knitted, with a golden R on it. Both other Weasley bothers wore jumpers of the same kind as well, one red with a green G, the other green with a red F. Of course, knowing them, one could immediately and safely assume that Fred was wearing the first, and George the second. He knew the Weasley matriarch knitted them each year for her many children. Last year, Ron, Fred, George and even Percy had walked out of the Gryffindor common room wearing them.

The sound of a fork clattering against stone tiles attracted his attention to his right, where Ginny was blushing bright red and bent down to pick up the fallen utensil. He chuckled a bit, before frowning as he realized something was wrong.

And where was *her* jumper?

The question stayed in his mind for the remainder of the breakfast. Possibly, the three Weasleys knew, but Ron wasn't talking to them, and he doubted even Hermione wanted to risk her nine lives asking the twins.

*Hermione.*

She lived in the Gryffindor common room. Perhaps she knew...?

Catching her eye was easy. She had, apparently, noticed the same thing. Harry had expected nothing less from the girl whose average grades neared Dumbledore's age. Upon seeing his glance, she nodded with a grave air.

"They don't know."

Those were Hermione's first words upon finding themselves alone in one of the many hallways of Hogwarts. This one was well lit, with very few portraits eavesdropping on the wall – come to think about it,

virtually every area of the school had at least one pair of ears listening and eyes watching everything, if not a dozen.

Hermione was evidently not very happy. Her face was twisted in a frown, her arms crossed and her eyes set and glaring outside the tall windows out of which the leafless, snow-covered forbidden forest moved softly to an unfelt wind, her expression gave more a sense of furious but repressed and controlled anger.

“Who?”

“The Weasleys!” Hermione snapped, her hands clenching tightly on her arms. “I mean... Mr and Mrs Weasley, they have *no* idea she’s a Slytherin!”

To say Harry was a bit surprised was an understatement. School had started three months ago – and lots of events had happened so far, one of which being the Weasley girl’s unexpected sorting dilemma. To say that the Weasleys still had not contacted their parents about this was odd, to say the least. He had expected them to at least ask for help, for some kind of re-sorting – even though he perfectly knew she liked being a Slytherin.

But wait... if the Mr and Mrs Weasley didn’t know about it, then Ginny hadn’t told them anything, either. Come to think about it, he hadn’t seen her really talk about it all to anyone – if she did, someone else had talked about it first. She was keeping it all to herself, bottled up, and he knew it probably wasn’t healthy. At least her parents would offer her their love and reassurance – he was certain parents like them wouldn’t abandon their child like this – if not a bit of guidance.

He knew she kept a diary, having seen her write in the small, black book, but writing words and talking to someone else were two totally different things. Writing it down meant writing your point of view of something, then, when you re-read them, you only made yourself more certain of your thoughts, or less, depending on how ridiculous they are. And he knew perfectly well that Ginny’s thoughts on the subject were nothing ridiculous. The problem was that he couldn’t talk to her about this; she would need to go to someone by herself. Writing your thoughts did not offer outside opinions, after all, and offering his own without being asked wouldn’t help.

He sighed. "How do you know?"

"Her jumper arrived this morning in the Gryffindor common room, with a letter asking them to write more often." She replied. "Unless one of her brothers likes purple and pink and has a name that starts with 'V', I suppose it's hers."

Chuckling, Harry nodded. "She'll be happy to know that."

"Oh no she won't." Hermione replied darkly. "That big git locked it up somewhere, and he isn't telling me where."

"Ron?"

"Who else?" She snapped back, huffing angrily. "Honestly, that boy, sometimes..." She sighed off her anger for the moment. "Percy's jumper came in, too, and a note for them to take care of their brother, as if he was in the hospital wing for a broken bone or a transfigured nose or something harmless like that."

"That's Dumbledore's work." Harry nodded. "If the victims' parents know about everything that's going on, the Daily Prophet would have a ball. He's keeping it all hidden, including who's been petrified."

"What about Justin? Surely his friends have written to their parents by now—"

"Not if the mail is watched. It probably is, just so there's no information about this whole mess coming out."

"Eventually it will, though." Hermione noted.

"Eventually." Harry agreed.

As much as Harry didn't like it, there was nothing he could do. Telling Ginny where her jumper was would make her angry at her brother – and he didn't want to cause a family rift – while doing nothing would cause her to fall back into the gloomy dark cloud she had spent a long time into, before. He didn't want that, either. Writing the other

Weasleys was out of question – the only thing they could do was admonish her brothers, which could either knock some sense into them, or cause them to dislike Ginny even more, and perhaps himself in the process.

Ginny also wouldn't appreciate having her pride being walked on like this.

During the next two days, Harry watched her even more closely than before. Whenever she was with everyone else, her behavior was cheerful, energetic and playful. However, once she thought she was alone, the first thing she would do is whip out her diary and write in it feverishly, a sad glitter in her eyes. Harry had to hand it to her; she hid her bad mood expertly. Had he not been watching so intensely, he would never have noticed.

This brought up the worrying concept that, perhaps, her recent good mood had also been an illusion.

After further reflection, he realized that, perhaps, the best way to help the girl was to distract her. And, thanks to Mrs Zabini, he had the perfect solution.

"Duel?" Ginny repeated.

"Are you interested?" Harry asked, while Blaise was watching closely, seeing as she was the 'most experienced' dueler, and thus would be expected as some kind of teacher. Not that she was qualified to be one – she had never actually been in a real duel, except if one counted her ferocious attack on the white queen on the giant chessboard the previous year.

"Hmm... I don't know..." Ginny mused, frowning. Harry felt his spirits sink. If she refused, then his efforts were for nothing. "I'll think about it."

Harry nodded and strode back, followed by his friend. At least this answer gave him a bit of hope to cling to.

As soon as he was out of her earshot, though, Blaise roughly grabbed his ear and pulled painfully.

"And you didn't ask *my* opinion?" She asked.

"Thought you-ow-wouldn't min-daouch! Watch eeyeow!"

To his relief, she released him then nodded with a smile.

"Good idea. If anything happens when we're not there to help, she'll be grateful for it."

Watching her walk away happily, Harry could only shake his head in bewilderment.

"Completely mental."

Harry had to hand it to Blaise; what little her mother had taught her of magical dueling and fighting, she had remembered exemplarily. Hermione had been told of the dueling lesson by her and had, quite obviously, decided to come. Unfortunately, Ginny was nowhere to be seen. Draco and Xu had tagged along as well, one wanting to relieve his boredom, the other for 'personal reasons'. Their so-called club was taking place in their out-of-common-room hanging-out spot, in the abandoned classroom.

The first thing Blaise showed them was the proper dueling stance, which Harry had to admit having forgotten. Unsurprisingly, Hermione had it to the book, except the position of her feet.

"Not wide enough, Hermione." Blaise told her. "You need to have good support, or else you'll take more time to recover from dodging spells, and you have a chance to trip and fall."

Draco was rather sloppy in his, although whatever mistakes the girl pointed out, he corrected and kept correctly... at least until more mistakes were pointed out. He gave the feeling of a stubborn, sealed bag of jello – he gave to her prodding, but as soon as she touched somewhere else, he took his imperfect form back.

Harry fared a little better, himself. His only problem being his left arm, which he constantly tucked aerodynamically to his body, as he was used to while flying. His Quidditch-honed habits were, for once, not helping.

The young Asian girl surprised them all with a flawless form, however. Blaise commented on two points – her legs were a bit looser, granting more speed of reaction, but less stability, and the wand hand was higher, which was a good idea if one wanted to block, but would telegraph her offense. Her stance was defensive, as the red-head noted, and to Harry's eyes, it felt obviously practiced.

He *did* wonder, though, how one so young could know how to duel, while a 'noble' like Draco had evidently no previous notion of it. Perhaps the Malfoy heir was too 'home-schooled' for that... from what he had heard about his mother, perhaps she was the reason why.

The lessons continued well over the remaining days of vacations, though Blaise completely *refused* to spend *all* their time on it. Every day, after seven, they would take place, and became known as the "hour of suffering", at Draco's insistence after being sent to the floor for the fifteenth time by a disarming hex.

He didn't know for what reason Ginny had refused to come along. Xu didn't either, when he confronted her about it. All he knew is that without distractions, there was little he could do to help her. His plan had failed.

The vacations ended four days into the new year, and the students were to return a day beforehand. Ginny and Xu were eager to have their friend Emma back, as she had promised a full resume of her trip in Spain for them, with pictures of the landscape. Quite honestly, Harry didn't really care – he didn't know the McKinnon girl all that much.

It was dark outside by the time the scarlet engine pulled in the station on the outskirts of the wizarding village of Hogsmeade, in the distance. Ginny and Xu had already left long ago and he knew they

were waiting for their friend in the entrance hall. The older three Slytherins were content of simply watching the horseless carriages roll up the small dirt path connecting the station and the school. There would be a welcome back feast, which he knew of from the previous year's experiences.

"Come on, let's go." Blaise said, grabbing his arm.

The great hall, re-arranged in the usual way, slowly filled. The deserted Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw tables saw students for the first time since the start of the vacations. Most faces were sullen, apparently unhappy to be back and away from the festive moods of their homes. Those that looked happy were apparently so because of the fact that they would be with their friends again.

"...adoptive parents hate Britain winters, they think it's too cold." He heard Emma's familiar voice say as she and her dorm mates walked toward the Slytherin table. "I don't think so, but I don't mind, going to Spain was the greatest!"

"Show us the pictures!" Ginny asked, pulling a chair to sit in front of Blaise.

Emma nodded and quickly dug through her pockets, pulling out an unsealed envelope.

"We had to take some of those in the Muggle way." She warned. "So they won't move until someone pours an animation brew on them."

Harry, being on the opposite side of the table, was unable to see the pictures, but from the awed "ooh"s and "aah"s from the other two girls, Harry guessed they were interesting.

"Who are they?" Ginny asked, pointing at something he couldn't see on one of the pictures.

"Those are my little adopted brothers, Daniel and Rupert. They're both seven years old and *obviously* magical. I mean... just last week, Daniel jinxed some Muggle's cell phone into constantly shouting out

words in Turkish whenever he spoke in it, just because that muggle had bumped into dad.”

The two girls chuckled a bit.

“Rupert look bit like Ginny stupid brother...” Xu noted, but was ignored.

The dueling practice was cancelled for the day, at its victims’ – pardon me, participants – unanimous decision. The feast had been rich and very heavy, and none of them wanted to push their bodies in dodging, blocking or attacking and take the risk of suddenly finding themselves in retching motions.

The next day, though, Blaise decided to let them duel with each other. Emma, when Xu had told her about it, had jumped on the occasion and joined in while trying unsuccessfully to pull Ginny in as well. Since they were now six students practicing in the disused room, it allowed them all to fight as pairs. Blaise set them together, however, as not all of them were of the same level.

Unfortunately, Blaise, Xu and Hermione were all quite good, while Harry, Draco and Emma were average at best. And while the latter two found themselves facing each other, Harry ended up against the small and agile Asian girl.

“*Expelliarmus!*” Harry cast quickly as soon as Blaise gave the signal. The curse was quickly becoming his favorite – how many times had he nailed Draco with it? He had long since forgot.

Unfortunately, Xu was much quicker and better than the Malfoy heir. Effortlessly dodging it, she waved her wand, her mouth moving only a bit to mumble the incantation, giving him absolutely no clue of what she was casting. A pair of blue, obviously magical arrows went straight toward him, forcing him to dodge quickly, stumbling on his knees as he did so. He quickly pointed his wand at her to cast a quick counter attack...

**\*THOCK\***

...but when one of the arrows dug painfully into his wrist causing his hand to spasm and release the holly branch, he found himself losing quickly. In a haze of pain, he released himself from the floor to grab his wrist reflexively...

**\*THOCK\***

...only to find the other arrow planted exactly where his hand had been before.

"Wh—What's the big idea?! Are you trying to kill me?!" Harry gasped, half out of pain, half out of breath.

Xu shook her head and waved her wand. The arrows magically vanished, leaving his skin intact, but a hole in both his sleeve and the rock tiles of the ground.

"Arrows meant to aim at hands, make them useless. Then it easy take out enemy."

Harry blinked at her words. She *definitely* knew how to duel and defend herself, that much was now certain. For what reason, he ignored. He *did* find it rather unsettling, however, that the young Chinese girl knew spells as powerful as that one.

And her choice of words, as well. *Enemy...* although, perhaps, that was due to her poor mastery of English.

"Whoa, look at 'em go..." Draco said, ignoring the pure-blooded girl seething in rage while in the effect of a full-body bind. "Go Blaise!"

Harry blinked and looked. His own duel had been short-lived, lasting nothing but a few seconds. It made him flinch to think of what would have happened if Xu had been a servant of Voldemort. Apparently, Draco and Emma's had been just as short. But Blaise and Hermione were still at it.

Blaise was obviously having difficulty. Her brow was sweating, her face frowning in deep concentration, as she launched two curses in quick succession, one of which Harry had read in one of the duel books. Hermione quickly blocked the first with a counter-curse Harry

had no idea existed and avoided the other, tripping on her shoes as she did and stumbling on her knees.

“*EXPELLIARMUS!*”

“*Protego!*” Hermione quickly cast, causing a brilliant shield to appear around her, deflecting the hex back at the red-head, who ducked underneath.

“Whoa... Hermione’s been holding back on us...” Draco said.

“She didn’t seem that good the other day,” Harry agreed.

“Knowledge against skill.” Xu noted. “Hermione know more spells, but Blaise more experienceful. Make them good in different way.”

Harry gave her a look. Her analysis was accurate. Hermione’s dodges and blocks were clumsy and obviously telegraphed, sometimes making her tumble. The only reason why she was still fighting was because she cast out spells that neither Slytherins knew existed, or how to defend against, and was using counters and blocks that probably were advanced second year or basic third year.

Finally, though, Hermione tripped one too many times, ending up on her stomach. In her dizzy daze, Blaise was finally able to cast an arm-locking jinx on her, ending the duel as she wasn’t capable of defending herself anymore.

“Woo!” Blaise cheered, a large grin on her face. “That was the best fight I’ve ever had!”

“Nice one,” Harry said, impressed. He was *light* years away from being as good as her.

“How did you get that good with just a bit of practice from your mum?” Draco asked. Harry had to agree that it was rather... impossible.

“Natural skill?” Blaise replied with a smirk and a wink. “Seriously, my mum is tough and rough. She pushed me quite hard. And my aunts

and uncles helped me out, too. Underage Italians are lucky, they can use magic in the summer... As long as Muggles don't see them, that is."

"That's because the Italian ministry are a bunch of slackers." Draco drawled with a smirk. "They're nearly as bad as the Swiss."

"As if Britain's is any better." Emma snorted.

"That's all very interesting, but I would appreciate if someone would cast the counter curse for this bloody thing!" Hermione snapped, flopping futilely on her stomach like a shored fish, trying to push herself upright.

Their practice continued much later than usual; Blaise, full of energy, wanted to duel again against Hermione, who wasn't so keen. Xu volunteered, but after defeating Blaise as easily as she had beat Harry, it changed his friend's source of energy from excitement to determination – "I *AM* going to beat you!!" After the fifteenth defeat, though, Blaise forfeited, leaving a smug Xu, who wondered exactly what "forfeit" meant.

Tired and sore, feeling the now familiar internal fatigue of magical exhaustion, Harry went to lie down in his bed, throwing his robe away. Crabbe and Goyle were both already snoring away, as the noiseless trembling of their silenced curtains told. With a sweep of his arm, he opened his own curtains and let himself fall on the soft, bouncy mattress with the small paper note in the middle of his back.

Erm... replay that, please?

"Wh..." Harry wondered, reaching with his arm to pull at the note.

***Knowledge is power. Power is life.***

"Weird..." He mumbled to himself, looking up. "Nemesis, who left this?"

The black snake looked down at him from the poles around which he was coiled and shook his head.

"I hafffe no idea... I swear, it jussst appeared out off nowhere..." The snake reported eerily, a worried tone in his high-pitched, whistle-like voice.

"You fell asleep and it was there when you woke up, eh?" Harry resumed.

The snake harrumphed. "Sssinssse you put it *Zsat* way..."

Chuckling, Harry re-read the note, trying to see if he recognized the writing. It was rather elegant, its letters shaped somewhat like one would expect of an old-style German style. The calligraphy gave him no clue whatsoever; the way the two 'is' were written – that is, perfectly identical, indicated that the writing was magical in nature, and not hand-done.

However, he recognized the ink. A deep, blood red color he had only seen once before.

Suddenly feeling uneasy, his insides frozen, Harry fished with his hand under his bed, where he had hidden the suspect after it had given him its rather unsettling offer.

The Grey-Paged Book was deceitfully innocent-looking, lying docilely in his hands like a normal, regular book. Only the unusual coloring of its pages and its title broke its image of normality. Quite honestly, the book gave Harry the creeps. Not more so by the fact that it was painfully obviously sentient – could magical objects think? – Nor by the subject it spoke of. It was the fact that talking to it made him feel like he was talking as an apprentice to some dark lord.

He opened the first page, which still bore his name in his own black ink and calligraphy – which brought up the rather unsettling possibility that it could see the world outside of its cover – then the second, where the book itself had asked of him to write, seeing as the front page had *sentimental value*, of all things.

As soon as he set his eyes on the page, a line, in the very same blood red ink as the note, appeared.

**Hello, Harry Potter. I have been expecting you.**

Quickly taking his quill from the bag he had dropped on the floor, he wrote: *Are you the one who wrote the note?*

For a moment, it stayed silent, as if debating to itself what it should do. Finally, it wrote, this time in green.

**I'm afraid that I must admit my culpability in the matter, Harry Potter.** It wrote. **It was, however, the fastest way to communicate with you.**

*And what do you want?*

**I still have not received an answer for my offer.**

Harry was about to write *No* when other lines quickly appeared.

**We both know you have many enemies, most of whom use the materials and teachings inside of this book. It would not be wise for you to leave your guard down against such deadly weapons as dark magic spells. By knowing the spells, you know how to counter them and, thus, how to protect yourself. Have you not seen an example of this, just a few hours before now?**

'How does it know about all that!?' Harry wondered with a start, accidentally dropping a drop of ink in the page. He hadn't told it about his connection to Voldemort, but even more unsettling was the fact that it seemed to know about what happened in their duel practice.

Nevertheless, it had a point. Voldemort and his supporters were after his guts, he knew that. Twice, now, he had stood in his way and thwarted him. Twice, he had survived meeting the darkest of dark lords in a century; Harry didn't doubt for a second that he was the first on his hit list, perhaps behind Dumbledore. Being first or second name on Voldemort's 'To kill' list was not an enviable position, and he knew the better and more varied the weapons he got now, the better were his chances of survival at their next meeting.

Gingerly, he picked up his quill and, after dipping it, slowly wrote three letters on the rough, dark parchment.

Yes.

Few minutes later, somewhere far away, buried under layers of biting cold ice, something stirred...

*His eyes as green as the fresh pickled toad...*

The valentine, Harry Potter et la Chambre des Secrets, page  
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## **Chapter 16: black knives and yapping monkeys**

The pale light of a *lumos* spell barely filtered through the closed green curtains of Harry's four poster bed. The room's occupants were all sound asleep, two of the beds' curtains trembling from mighty thunderous snores, the other one stretching a bit with the imprint of a bare Malfoy foot.

The sky outside was dark, but the sun was slowly rising over the far horizon. It would soon turn into beautiful orange colors before settling on blue for another day. But he didn't see this, not just because the only windows peeking through the walls of their dormitory were thin cracks at ground level, with a view blocked by the castle walls preventing one from even seeing the sky, but because he was concentrated in his reading.

January had sped by with few incidents, most of them being regular class-related mistakes – touching a spine of an itching-poisonous rosebush in Herbology, having poor aim and turning his own finger into a centipede in Transfiguration or simply being in the same Potions classroom as Neville Longbottom. No attacks had happened, to everyone's relief. Some thought that, perhaps, the heir had received common sense for Christmas.

The Jusenkyo episode had fortunately remained a relative secret. By relative, I mean that most people knew *something* had

happened, but not necessarily what. The source of the rumors became obvious when Lee Jordan, a close friend and dorm mate of the Weasley twins, called him by the name of Hailey.

Peeves had become rather easy to control – all you really needed was a bucket of water, and the poltergeist would go off flying in fear. The other students had no idea why, but this sent the ‘Jusenkyo victims’ into hysterics every time, as he had not been informed of the fact that the curse was a one-time-only deal. The password to the Slytherin common room had also been changed to octopus, for some reason. Some Slytherins complained that it sounded just stupid, though.

Lockhart’s lessons took a turn for the funny. Every ten minutes, the blonde took a look through a mirror, as if to reassure himself that he was still a human, and that his teeth and hair were still flawless. Blaise, Harry and Draco had taken in to doing as many monkey references during his lessons and watching his reaction. When Crabbe and Goyle had started in, too – with a “Hey, isn’t that a monkey?” that sent Lockhart tumbling for his mirror – the professor had decided it was enough. Outside the door, a sign now read: “Monkeys are forbidden.”

Someone, most likely Fred or George – or perhaps Draco – had crossed out Monkey and written “Lockharts”. The Blonde had still to realize it.

The grey paged book lying open on his pillow, Harry was staring at the letters written in it with only the small light of his wand. He had gone to sleep early to wake up early and read, as he had done for the past month or so.

At first, he had had guarded intentions toward the spells taught to him by the book, who *only* switched page after he had mastered the spell, thus forcing him to go through every single one. Slowly, though, he began to find it... interesting. Some spells were rather gory or disturbingly powerful, and some felt so... *wrong* that he absolutely *refused* to use them ever again.

Re-reading the instructions of the spell one last time to make sure he understood every step correctly, he flicked out the *Lumos* spell and concentrated.

The book had said that, as his mastery of the more potentially dangerous spells increased, he would not need to wait so long to cast one of them. The reason he had to concentrate was because, as the book had explained it, the spells fed on a deeper ‘layer’ of magic. It had compared a wizard’s magic to an orange – “light” magic sent out dry peels, “dark” magic sent out the seeds. The problem was extracting said seeds, but they hit harder than the peel.

Causing pain and harm was about all it could do, however. The same as a thrown seed, actually.

Slowly, Harry repeated the commands he had done every night for a month. He closed his eyes and felt inside him, trying to “feel” his magic. He did it easily, now. It felt warm and comforting, a part of him that he never wanted to part with.

The next part was trying to feel a negative emotion – Dark magic, like most magic spells, needed a proper state of mind. Any negative feeling would do, be it despair, jealousy or anger. And Harry, thinking of Voldemort and the Dursleys, easily found his source. Only then did he probe deeper in the feeling of his magic, which suddenly felt as warm as a fire.

His bandanna-clad forehead began to heat up. It was not painful, but it wasn’t exactly pleasant, either. He guessed it came from his scar, caused by his use of dark magic. It was possible that the only “death curse” scar in existence reacted from the element that had caused its creation. It wasn’t like he could compare it to anything, either, and the book held no answer for his queries. It had even gone as far as to firmly assure him that surviving a Killing curse was physically and magically impossible.

He had happily reminded it that, in that case, he was dead. The book had then pointed out a zombifying ritual. That had shut him up very nicely.

Slowly, he swished his wand, feeling its comforting warmth suddenly cool down from the different magic it received from him. His fingers felt cold, now, as if he had just put them in a freezer and had kept them in there for half an hour. He didn't pay heed to it anymore – it was normal. So the book said, anyway. Harry was starting to dislike its know-it-all attitude. Then again, it was a reference book.

"I'm ready." He told the book in a calm whisper, mindful of ears that might be listening.

**Very well. I will release the rat.**

With that, the book's pages blurred as they quickly turned, too fast for him to see anything but an ethereal-looking grey mass. When they stopped, it was at the final page, where a physically impossible hollow was dug through the page, through the cover and into a deep, black, endless hole.

Then, the "rat" popped out. It was a small, dark grey mass of undistinguishable features – they constantly shifted, as if the creature had no physical form but what it believed it had, and changed its mind every ten seconds. It had, however, a vaguely humanoid shape, with two "arms" and "legs" poking out, often twisting in impossible manners. The first time Harry had seen one, he had nearly screamed – which would have woken up Draco and brought a small disaster down on him. Now, though, they were *almost* familiar.

The disturbing feeling of wrongness that washed over him every time was still unnerving him, though.

Pointing his wand at the "rat" before it could orient itself and attempt an escape – as the first one had tried to do – Harry followed the instructions he had read in the book. With a violent swish of the icy cold holly wood, he muttered the incantation, hoping that Draco was deeply asleep:

*"Geistötend Zauber!"*

As the awkwardly pronounced German words shot out of his mouth, his forehead gave a powerful wave of heat that neared the

painful, but never reached it. In that sense, it was different from the scorching agony of Voldemort's influence. He felt his magic shift and weave according to his wishes and couldn't resist a satisfied smirk. He felt strong, now. Very strong. He hesitated to think invincible, though, but it was close. It was a wave of pure power.

A wave a black lightning flew out of his wand, which now felt like an icicle, and hit the "rat" directly, causing it to fly up against the curtain and disappear in a puff of smoke. He had passed this test – otherwise, it would have stayed. He allowed himself a grim smirk, knowing the book would now allow him to learn the next curse.

Few minutes later, the book was safely concealed in his folded invisibility cloak, itself hidden under a bunch of Uncle Vernon's old socks. The sun outside was just starting to peek over the castle walls through the thin windows of the second year Slytherin boys' dormitory. He knew Draco wouldn't be long, and that soon they would climb down the stairs to greet Blaise, as they were accustomed to.

Sure enough, Draco's curtains spread apart with the soft rustling sound of silk cloth rubbing against wooden poster. The icy-blue-eyed boy, hair tousled and almost begging for care and a good dose of gel, peeked out.

"Morning..." Harry said, acting as if he had just woke up himself. It had been hard, at first, to hide things like that from him – as far as he remembered, he hadn't really kept a secret from his best friend. Now, however, it was getting unnervingly easy. Perhaps he was slowly killing his conscience, although, most likely, he had been doing the same thing for a month, so of course it would be easier.

"Hey." Draco returned with a yawn, passing a hand through his hair and messing it up even more thoroughly. With practiced movements and a dazed look in his eyes, the boy pulled out a towel and fresh clothes, before walking into the shower room of their dormitory. If Harry had decided to use it first, the boy would

have gotten suspicious. Besides, he *despised* waiting, and tended to threaten to take the door down if he wasn't allowed his morning shower as soon as he woke up.

After Harry had his turn, he walked out the door – waking up Crabbe and Goyle through jets of icy cold water from his wand – to catch up on Blaise and Draco, who were both waiting for him, as usual. Unanimously, with a single common nod for all discussion, the three headed for the great hall...

"WHAT THE HELL?!"

Blaise's colored outburst pretty much summed the thoughts of her other two friends as they entered the hall, which seemed to have taken a turn for the colorful itself. Pink and yellow seemed to be the dominating color, although there was a fair dose of red thrown in, as well. The Slytherin table was covered with a hideous, candy-pink sheet, but the other houses were not spared, either. Vases of diversely colored roses were aligned on the tables as well. The ultimate insult, though, was the banners normally hanging from the stone beams connecting the two walls. Instead of the snake-lion, green-gold-red-silver design, they were now golden roses with little pink hearts in the background. Pink heart-shaped confetti also constantly fell from the roof, like some disgustingly... *PINK* rain.

All and all, it was a scene for the horror movies.

Harry quickly wondered why the hall had been so mutilated. There was no way someone had done all this damage in one day, without anyone noticing. And there was no way Dumbledore, as bonkers as he was, would allow this, unless it was for a special occasion...

He gave a look around, trying to find the most likely culprits. Fred and George were sitting beside their friend Lee Jordan, and all three looked sick enough to prove their innocence. Peeves was nowhere to be seen – if this had been his doings, he would have been hovering somewhere nearby, cackling at their faces. Besides, it wasn't his style.

However, it was the style of Lockhart. Sure enough, sitting at the high table, there was the blonde teacher, dressed in robes as pink as the rest of the hall. He, Blaise and Draco hesitatingly took a seat at their unrecognizable table.

'Wait... we're in February, aren't we?' He thought to himself, suddenly feeling afraid.

As if to justify his fears, Lockhart got up and clapped his hands to get everyone's attention away from their conversations – mostly about the hall's predicament – and toward him.

"Happy Valentine's day!" Lockhart declared, confirming Harry's suspicions. He hadn't really kept such a close look on the dates. "First, I would like to thank the forty-six people here who sent me a card for this occasion..."

Pansy and Millicent, some distance away, both giggled and blushed. Harry had to fight a retch.

"...as you can see, I took the liberty of giving you this little surprise, but that's not all!"

"Enough already!" Blaise moaned loudly enough to be heard all over the hall, causing bursts of agreeing laughter.

To his credit, Lockhart managed to ignore her. With a clap of his hands, the doors of the great hall squeaked open and twelve midgets strode in, dressed in identical togas decorated with small wings. Each of them held a harp under one arm and disgruntled expressions on their faces.

"Those are my message-carrying cupids!" Lockhart said, pointing at the midgets, ignoring the fact that one of them gave the teacher 'the finger' at being called a cupid. "They are charged of giving people their valentines for today!"

"Hence their names." Draco muttered with a smirk. "How much do you bet they'll happily give Lockhart an insulting one?"

"Anything as long as you do it," Harry replied with an identical smirk, "and we get to post it up at dinner, in front of everyone."

"Excellent idea," Blaise grinned, "what classes do we have, Draco?"

"Charms, then History." The boy replied. "Potions after dinner, then the last period's off. Valentine day special and all..." He gave a shudder while looking around the room, "much better way to celebrate that what that idiot's done."

As it turned out, the Charms class was nothing if not pointless. Flitwick *tried* to show them a version of the levitation charm meant for higher control than the regular "Wingardium Leviosa", but with the midgets going about, walking in class and handing valentines, he was virtually unable to put six words in without being interrupted.

"Remember, Swish, twiddle, flick and say:—"

"Delivery for mister Malfoy." A midget called from the door, causing the diminutive teacher to squeak in surprise and fall off his pile of books.

Harry and Blaise both gave a look at Draco, who sighed and opened his hand to receive it. On his desk were three others, also addressed to him. One of them was from a certain Marietta Edgecombe, about whom he had never heard the name of before.

The midget grumpily strutted over to the blonde boy and handed over his fourth Valentine. For a moment, the boy gave it a look, wondering if he should read it. Upon reading the identity of its sender, however, he gave a dejected sigh and opened it.

The letter was pink, with lots of hearts and red roses and a message sweet enough to have Draco puckered up in disgust for the next two weeks. Harry stretched his neck, reading over the boy's shoulder to satisfy his curiosity. It was one of those pre-made cards in which the sender only wrote their name.

*Roses are red, Violets are blue  
I have to say that I love you  
If your heart is good and pure as you  
Will you say you love me too?*

*Pansy*

The letter ended with a sickening little heart, handwritten by the girl. Harry gave a look at his friend's face, which was twisted in a mask of emotionless cold. Harry, however, knew he was disgusted – his upper lip shivered a bit, as if he was barely holding back a sneer through his poker face.

“So, what are you going to say?”

Draco put down the letter and shrugged nonchalantly, hiding his disgust expertly. “Nothing, it says I only have to say anything if my heart is good and ‘as pure as me’.” His lips twisted in a smirk. “And it’s most certainly neither.” He declared proudly.

Somewhere in the back rows, Pansy pouted a bit at his answer, before returning to her fascinating discussion with Millicent about the best possible use of nail polish on their toes.

If one thought receiving a valentine from someone one knew and had no interest to was the worst thing that could happen to one, then Harry, few minutes after the bell rang, would have told one to politely stick their thoughts in their rectal output sockets.

“You’re Harry Potter?” A midget asked him, reading the name out loud from a piece of paper in his hand. His other hand was holding his harp in an oddly anticipating way.

"Er... no." Harry quickly replied. "Not in my year, we're third years."

"Eh... Har-ouch!" Crabbe attempted to correct him when Blaise stomped his foot.

Is, by now, everyone familiar with Murphy's law: "Anything that can go wrong *will* go wrong"? I hope so. If not, here's another example:

"Harry!!" A childish, excited voice called out as a bunch of first year Hufflepuffs walked by on their way to one of their classes.

To Harry's utter horror, Colin Creevey busted his hastily thrown on cover. His voice also attracted the attention of virtually everyone in the hallway, including the approaching first year Slytherins, on their way to the Charms classroom themselves.

"I wanted to say sorry about the way my housemates might treat you, they think you're the heir, but you can't be the heir 'cuz you're not evil even if you're a Slytherin and—"

"So you are Harry Potter!" The midget said victoriously. "I have a singing valentine for you."

Harry's thoughts whirled in a horrified mix stuck in the blender set to "purée". 'Oh, this is so wrong... so bad... this is going to be so humilia---**SINGING?!**'

Clearing his throat, the midget tweaked one of the chords on his harp, producing a soft note. With a deep breath, he started to sing in a screechy, bad voice of someone thinking he can sing better than reality reveals:

*"His eyes are as green as a fresh pickled toad,*

*His hair is as dark as a blac—"*

"**SILENCIO!!**" Harry quickly cast at the midget, interrupting his screeching voice. A suit of armor, some distance in behind him, finally collapsed, unable to cope with the noise. With his bane unable to sing, speak or protest, his breathing heavy, his face

blushing in humiliation, Harry stormed away, roughly pushing Ginny against Emma and out of his way as he passed.

Harry was still angry at whoever sent him that valentine during the history class. The midgets who interrupted Binns' class – well, sort of, since the ghost didn't even register them and didn't stop his lecture at all – were much more wary around him and kept their voices as low as possible, as if afraid he'd cast a silencing charm on him, too. He was too frustrated to care though.

Blaise and Draco, a safe distance away, busied themselves on the poem for Lockhart. Every now and then, he could hear one of them either chuckle evilly. Binns paid them no heed, his eyes emptily staring at the stone wall behind them. For a moment, Harry wondered what would happen if his entire class stayed outside the door; would the ghost still teach to an empty class?

Probably. It wasn't like their presence valued for much anyway, he mused as he looked at his classmates; Pansy doodling on a piece of parchment, Millicent reading a magazine in plain sight, not bothering to hide it and Crabbe and Goyle, whispering about something and chuckling in nosy snorts and wheezes.

The bell rang, announcing the end of the torture sess—Class, sorry. The grateful Slytherins filed out of the door while Binns gathered the notes laying on his desk through his hands – as in, not able to pick them up, but not bothering to care about a small detail like that.

Harry was much calmer, by now, the midget episode partially forgotten. He still wanted to find whoever had sent him that valentine and curse them to next week Thursday evening, but he was no longer seething at anything that dared approach him. Sensing the danger gone, his friends were back at his sides, both of them bearing Cheshire cat smiles on their faces. A neatly folded piece of parchment was in Draco's hand.

"It's ready," The boy said, grinning.

Harry smirked at him. "Great... can I see?"

"Not 'till dinner time, when—justaminute..." She quickly picked the parchment from Draco's hand and roughly grabbed a passing grumbling midget by the shoulder with her other hand. With a smirk, she handed it to him, whispering a special demand to the small "cupid".

Cupids are normally not supposed to give evil crooked smirks, are they?

The great hall was still horrible when they came in to have dinner. Fortunately, the pink sheets covering the tables had vanished, probably at the insistence of the house heads. Unfortunately, the banners were still there, although, for some reason, the way Peeves was hovering around them with a small table knife in his hands told him they wouldn't for very long.

The chatters around the Slytherin table were in full action. The rumors of the singing valentine were circulating and already the stories he could tell were exaggerated. He had cut off the midget so quickly he had no idea what the intentions of the sender might have been: For all he knew, it could have been:

*His eyes are as green as a fresh pickled toad,*

*His hair is as dark as a black knife*

*I want his head, wish he was dead*

*The bastard to whom I hold strife*

...What? It could have been that. Really! Besides, what love letter compares the subject to a *toad*, hmm?

Already, the rumors circulating varied between a): He had received an anonymous valentine from an admirer, b): He had received a declaration of undying, romantic love and an offer to take his virginity from some sixth year Hufflepuff girl he didn't even

know, c): He had received a declaration of undying, romantic love and an offer to take his virginity from some sixth year Hufflepuff *GUY* he didn't even know, d): Ginny had sent him a valentine and was, therefore, as if it was an undeniable proof, his girlfriend. The last one was particularly amusing; especially from the way Ginny blushed to the root of her hair and protested loudly enough for the head table to hear it clearly over the conversations.

Lockhart was at said table, explaining the importance of having pink-colored tables during St-Valentine's day to an uninterested Sprout, a frowning McGonagall, a Flitwick who had charmed himself deaf and a very much murderous Professor Snape. The latter gave an unheard retort to Lockhart's 'discussion' that caused the blonde to gasp in theatrical astonishment while his face colored in genuine but impotent anger.

"Come on, stupid midget..." he heard Blaise grumble as she fretted nervously while absentmindedly trying unsuccessfully to bend her spoon into a pretzel. "Hurry up, now would be perfect---there he is!"

Sure enough, the small cupid-clad cranky midget had just set foot in the great hall and was walking toward the head table. But he wasn't alone. Six other identically clad and just as sarcastically merry dwarves strode behind him. Each seven of them had evil grins on their faces that made them look like invading fallen angels of the ridiculously obviously fake kind.

"What owes us the pleasure of this visit?" Professor Dumbledore asked, eyes twinkling knowingly while flashing a look at Blaise.

Blaise smiled pleasantly and gave the headmaster a wave, while muttering to her friends: "Oh crap. Dumbledore knows. I'm screwed."

Draco, looking for all purposes bored out of his mind, as was expected of him, hid his mouth from view and agreed: "You and me, both."

The head midget lifted a roll of parchment and smirked. "We have a singing Valentine for Professor Lockhart," He said, causing

the blonde at the table to turn whiter than a snowflake. “The author would like to remain anonymous.”

“Is that so?” Dumbledore asked, his voice betraying his mirth. “Well, go ahead! As you see, Mister Lockhart just *can’t wait* to receive it. Right, Gilderoy?”

Lockhart’s face colored again as he was checkmated in two moves. “Er... certainly...?”

“Well then,” The midget grinned evilly, turning toward his co-cupids. “At three, one, two, three:”

And they began to sing as one, all of them off-key in a different way and *purposely* too loud, but the song’s words were clearly audible all over the hall:

*We all know him as Lockhart, the bane of our hearts  
His job is to teach us against the dark arts,  
Well, we suppose, since that’s the name of our class  
Though in this case, it’s his face we’re always up  
against.*

Harry snorted, as did most of the great hall. Draco and Blaise were doing their best not too look *too* innocent. It was rather hard, though, especially from the way they grinned and snickered *before* the punches came.

The midgets started to clap their hands and, suddenly perfectly chorused, though still slightly off-key, launched into the refrain:

*Teeth-induced blindness, colors causing sickness,  
We say this with no heavy heart*

*Has no sense of fashion, writes nothing but fiction,  
Sound the alarms, run for the barns, it's Gilderoy  
Lockhart!*

Harry risked a look at the head table. Lockhart was seething with rage, now, his wand clenched in his fist nearly to the point of cracking in two, spitting angry red sparks. The other teachers, though, didn't share this sentiment. Flitwick was still unknowingly eating, McGonagall was *trying* to look stern – which was a tad bit difficult considering a grin the size of London was trying to poke its way through her face – Sprout was openly grinning and chuckling. Professor Snape was giving the blonde a hard smirk while his eyes were pointed at Draco and Blaise. He evidently had guessed as well.

Most surprisingly, or perhaps not so, was Dumbledore, who was now laughing so hard it was probably audible on the other side of the Atlantic.

*He wears those flashy colors trying to get us running,  
All it makes us want to do is just burst out crying,  
His hair is long and definitely feminine,  
We bet it gets split ends and bends like a drunkard's  
line!*

*Screaming like a banshee, yapping like a monkey  
Here's a warning to young and old of heart:  
Has no sense of fashion, writes nothing but fiction,  
Sound the alarms, run for the barns, it's...*

*Teeth-induced blindness, colors causing sickness,  
We just can't wait 'till he's gone  
Has no sense of fashion, writes nothing but fiction,  
It's: Teeth-grind, color-blind, screaming monkey,  
yapping banshee  
Sound the alarms, run for the barns!  
Gilderoy Lockhart's in town!!*

Applauses and laughter erupted from everywhere in the hall, along with loud – and mostly female – protests and jeers. The latter did not seem to faze the seven midgets at all as they bowed to the acclamations. Dumbledore himself was still laughing, tears streaming down his cheeks. The other teachers had given up trying to hold back their mirth and were also either laughing, chuckling – Only Professor Snape, actually, although his smirk could have made demons cringe in fear – or... well, in Flitwick's case at least, being thoroughly confused. He had, apparently, removed the deafening spell on himself only *after* the song was over.

As for Lockhart, he was very much obviously furious, but managed – barely – to hide it behind a grin that looked much tighter than usual.

“Excellent song, whoever made this,” Lockhart declared, his voice managing to close the enormous gaping hole between a jovial tone and a seething growl. “But I noticed one or two mistakes. If you'd please come to my office after class, I'll be more than glad to *help you correct them.*”

With that sarcastically gentle and dangerously generous offer, the irate professor took his cue to indignantly walk toward the great hall doors...

“GYAHAAHAHAHA!!!”

And ending up swallowed in a very heavy-looking mass of candy-pink cloth as Peeves flew off, still holding the table knife in his hand.

While the great hall erupted in new waves of laughter, Harry gave a look at his friends, still grinning.

"Nice song, you even managed to put a monkey joke in."

Blaise smirked. "It wasn't easy sometimes... you have no idea how many times we re-wrote the second verse."

"Seventeen." Draco sighed. "And you used my ink."

"To quote Hermione: I'm sure your finances are devastated." Blaise retorted with a pull of her tongue.

"So," Harry interrupted before an argument could set its foot down, "are you going to take him up on his offer?"

"Are you kidding?" Blaise and Draco both asked.

"Yes, actually." He replied with a smirk.

'Maybe today won't be so bad after all...'

Harry, Harry, Harry. When will you learn not to tempt fate?

"It's over for you, Rubeus. I have to turn you in. They want to close the school if the attacks continue."

Tom Marvolo Riddle, Harry Potter et la Chambre des Secrets,  
page 261

## **Chapter 17: T.M.Riddle**

The cauldrons were boiling softly in the silent, dim and cold dungeon that housed the second year Potion class, that afternoon. The students, a mass of assembled Gryffindors and Slytherins busily cutting, preparing or dunking various ingredients in the steaming mixtures before them, were mostly smiling or in a good mood, which was something of a rarity during this specific class.

"Nice song," Blaise heard for the fifth time since the dinner fiasco.

Though she had not as such put her name in the song, nor had Draco, their 'private' discussion afterwards had been overheard by Padma Patil, at the nearby Ravenclaw table. She put two and two together, guessed who had written it and had immediately felt the uncontrollable urge to tell her twin sister about it. Since said twin sister was never far away from Lavender Brown, and seeing that Brown was one of the biggest gossips in the school, it was needless to say that, thirty minutes later, the news had reached most of the 'information nodes' all over the school and was well on its way to be known by all. Rumors were quite the hot thing, at Hogwarts.

Hopefully, nobody would tell Lockhart.

Harry heard Draco hum the song to himself, grinning as he cut some aconite roots in thin slices, as instructed by Professor Snape. The boy had accepted the praises and the applauses for

the song like a sponge, giving whomever had thanked him either a grateful, 'I am superior' smirk, or simply an 'I am superior' smirk if he considered them less worthy. Blaise had gotten her own share of praise, but was more modest about it...

"I wrote most of it." She declared proudly.

...relatively.

"If, by now, your potion is not green, then you have done something wrong or are simply going too slow." Professor Snape said, giving a glare at Longbottom, whose potion had taken a violent, unnerving red color and had taken the consistency of solidifying concrete, as proven by the spoon dipped vertically that the plump boy was trying to pull down. Harry couldn't resist a snicker; his own potion was flawlessly green. The next step, based on the instructions on the blackboard, was to let it simmer for ten minutes to dim the highly poisonous plant it used as base.

'Once you get past Snape, potion class becomes easy.'  
Harry thought, stirring his potion proudly.

Sitting beside him, Blaise obviously fit in the second category; she had been distracted and had taken several minutes of lateness. Snape was, uncharacteristically, ignoring her mistake, although he *did* give her a passing, disapproving glance. Frantically, she ripped open the bag of aconite Professor Snape had given them at the start of the lesson, put the root down on the table and picked up her cutting knife.

"Longbottom, is it written 'Turn the table to ashes' anywhere in the instructions? No? Then for Merlin's sake, lower that fire!"  
Snape snapped, taking Harry's attention to him.

The Gryffindor boy squeaked and quickly waved his wand at the fire, accidentally spreading burning embers all over the table. Fortunately, the table seemed protected against such incidents and the fiery chips magically burned themselves to ashes within seconds.

**“OUCH!”**

The shrill scream, followed by a colorful explosion of expletives, took his attention back at Blaise, who was looking at her hands. The knife was on the table, cut halfway through a root

“Is something wrong, Zabini?” Snape sneered, heading back to them. Harry quickly turned his attention to his potion, which still had three minutes to rest.

“My hands...” The girl said in a wince, rubbing her hands together “they itch!”

“Is that so?” Professor Snape asked, his voice betraying a bit of curiosity. “Show me.”

Meekly, the girl showed him her hands. Harry took a look for himself, and gasped. Her fingers’ skin was bright red and was starting to swell.

“Hmm... You are to stay here after class, Zabini. For now, don’t touch anything and don’t scratch.” And he walked away, leaving a seething Blaise.

“Don’t scratch?!” she hissed under her breath, sliding her injured hands in her sleeves. “It feels like a dozen ants are tap-dancing under my skin!”

Blaise complained about her hands for a long time after this, muttering under her breath, cursing the inventor of Aconite to the other end of the world, wondering why Snape wasn’t helping her now... the list went on and on. When the bell finally rang, Harry and Draco both stayed to wait for her, to the grateful and smiling girl’s joy. Professor Snape lifted an eyebrow questioningly.

“Mister Potter, Mister Malfoy, didn’t you hear the bell?” He asked.

“We’re waiting for Blaise.” Harry replied.

"I'll have to prepare the antidote; it might take a long time, and—"

"We've got all day." Draco interrupted.

"—and," Professor Snape continued forcefully and on a slower tone, glaring at the Malfoy boy, "I need all my concentration for this, or else it has a possibility to fail and take out what's *left* of her hands."

It was, in covered words, a strict order to leave, an order that all three Slytherins caught immediately. Giving the girl apologetic glances, both boys got up, lifting their bags on their backs.

"We'll wait for you in the empty classroom," He told her in a whisper. "Try to have fun."

"Fun? With Snape? I'd rather spend an hour with Fluffy in a small room." Blaise replied sourly in the same way.

"Doubt he'd appreciate that." Draco noted with a grin, remembering the way Blaise had single-handedly defeated the three-headed dog the previous year. She apparently remembered as well, seeing as she gave the platinum-haired boy a dark scowl.

"Don't worry, red hood, the big bad wolf doesn't bite without a reason." Harry replied, his tone amused.

"The big bad wolf hates my guts," Blaise noted gloomily. "That's reason enough."

Climbing up two different flights of stairs, the two Slytherins headed for the empty classroom, making their way through the happily chattering after-class crowd. More students smiled at Draco as they passed, causing the smaller boy to grin and puff his chest superiorly. Harry could only sigh in embarrassment. His friend was such a spotlight-hugger.

"Careful," Harry gave him a look and a smirk, "if you keep this up, you won't be able to pass through doors."

"Har, har, Harry." Draco replied flatly.

Grinning, the black-haired boy pulled a door open and stepped through, only to bang his nose against a solid stone wall, directly behind. The platinum-haired boy let out a guffaw.

"Now who can't pass through doors?" He taunted.

Rubbing his nose, Harry gave his friend a scowl before turning to the wall that had been hidden behind the pretend-door. "I was sure there was a staircase here..."

"There is, just not today." Draco replied with a shrug, as if disappearing staircases were common occurrences in a normal world. "I think the nearest one is beside the first attack's wall."

Harry nodded in agreement and the two switched directions. The crowds, as they approached the scene of the attack, became thinner and easier to navigate through – the freezing cold air seeping through a wall almost completely open with large windows made most avoid this passage as much as they could. Harry and Draco both shivered as they passed, rubbing their arms through the thin sleeves of their robes.

The black-haired boy was quite relieved to see that at least *this* staircase had not decided to take a sabbatical. The hallway was as dark as before, with, for only decoration the burning torches on the wall, giving away gentle and comforting heat contrasting to the chilly winter air, a door to some girls' toilets marked as "out of order" and the eerie, glowing message painted in red ink on the wall that had been pinned on him for the better part of the first trimester.

Their attention momentarily went to the wall as they headed for the staircase. This had been the site of the first attack, when Norris had been petrified, to the delight of the students and the horror of the caretaker – which no doubt added to the students' delight. But the next attack had completely removed that joy, seeing as the next victim had been human – and pure-blood, to boot.

So distracted were they that they did not notice putting their feet on a rather slippery surface. Loosing their footing, both boys slipped and fell on their backs with painful thuds, Harry's head bouncing off the hard stone ground rather hard, but not harmfully.

"What in the... UGH! The ground's all wet!!" Draco whined, looking down at the ground they had slipped on.

A thin, but wide puddle of water, most likely covering an even thinner layer of ice, spread across the ground, almost invisible unless one knew it was there and tried to see it. It covered most of the area around the staircase, making any attempted approach risky.

Deciding on the safest approach, the two boys took support on the wall and walked slowly, deciding against sliding when Harry's front toes got wet from water seeping through the front of his shoes, soaking his socks uncomfortably.

"The water's coming from under the door," Draco noted, frowning.

"There was water the day of the attack, too," Harry remembered, agreeing, "that toilet is out of order; it's probably for that reason. It leaks."

The two were silent, testing their foothold against the ice. The water was slightly warmer around the door, creating less ice for them to slip on.

Unfortunately, Draco took this as a safe sign and let go of the wall. His foot found a lone piece of ice laying there; he found himself falling sideways, knocking his shoulder hard against the door, thus opening it, and landed in a wet splash on the flooded floor of the bathroom.

"Are you all right?" Harry asked worriedly, walking through the doorway.

"Oh, sure," Draco replied sarcastically, "I'm drenched, cold, my shoulder hurts, my back hurts and my hair is a mess. Never better!"

Harry shrugged. "If you're sure..."

"Who's there?"

The girl's voice interrupted Harry's reply. Quickly wary, the boy looked around, trying to find the source of the voice. Now that he paid attention to it, he immediately noticed something was odd. The air stunk of stagnant water, as if some of the liquid had stayed unmoving for years. Six toilet stalls were closed off, lined up against the wall. A bunch of sinks were arranged in a tall, circular structure near the opening, each of its taps but one spewing water at full force into already full sinks, thus flooding the bathroom. This could *not* be accidental, not even by magical means.

The source of the voice revealed herself, floating through one of the closed stalls. It was a ghost of a girl who looked perhaps one or two years older than themselves. Her rather rounded face was framed by thick glasses and marred with a handful of ugly pimples. Seeing them, she scowled.

"This is a girls' bathroom! Get out of here!" She snapped.

Thinking quickly, Harry replied, "We're just turning off the water."

'Maybe she's a psychotic man-hating ghost who protects the bathroom...' Harry mused, thinking that, at Hogwarts, anything was possible. 'We'd better get out as quickly as we can.'

The girl gave a sniff, crossing her arms. "Right, the only reason people walk in here is to turn off the taps and throw things as me!"

"Throw... but, aren't you a ghost?" Draco blinked. "It's not like it matters—"

"Oh, right!" The girl exploded somberly, before taking a fake voice: "Let's all throw books at Myrtle, because she can't feel it! Ten points if you can get it through her stomach! Fifty points if it goes through her head! Well, ha, ha, ha! What a lovely game, I don't think!"

"Thanks for the idea." Draco replied with a smirk.

'Myrtle' gave a pitiful wail and floated right back through the closed door she had came from, a second before a loud splash came and more water splattered across the floor.

"...delightful company, that girl." Draco mused sarcastically.

Harry nodded, befuddled, and turned the taps off one by one.

"I wonder what had her so worked up, though." He thought out loud. "She said someone threw a book at her... I wonder what kind..."

As I mentioned before, Harry is quite brave, quite smart, quite powerful, but extremely and undeniably curious.

"You've been hanging around Weasleys too much if you want to pick up other people's trash, Harry." Draco drawled, but did not stop his friend from satisfying his greatest fault. Knowing him as he did, Harry perfectly knew his friend was as curious as he was.

The inside of the stall was completely soaked. The walls were dripping with fresh toilet water, along with some of the ceiling and the floor. However, seeing as the entirety of the bathroom's floor was flooded, it did not make much of a difference. Checking around the toilet, Harry found nothing. Inside, however, was a small, familiar-looking black book.

Even more curious than before, Harry picked it up and shook as much water off it as he could. When it was relatively dry, he checked its condition. The book seemed in perfect shape, which made him wonder exactly why it had been thrown away like this, in a toilet where it would most likely be damaged. There were many trash holes around the walls of the school, and thus there was no logical reason to dump something like that here, unless one didn't want what was in the book to be read.

Wiping some water from the cover, Harry saw golden letters inscribed on the black leather.

*Property of T.M. Riddle*

"Him again!" Harry blinked. "He's everywhere!"

"Who?" Draco asked, no longer drawling.

"T.M. Riddle. He has three awards in the trophy room, and now *this*."

"T.M. Riddle..." Draco mused. "I know that name... the most brilliant student Hogwarts has seen in a century – nearly beat Dumbledore's scores, but not quite. He was a Slytherin, too."

"How do you know all that?"

The boy shrugged. "Father told me his story so many times, you wouldn't believe. I think he wants him to be my role model or something like that." He gave a disdainful snort. "I never heard of that guy anywhere except for back then, anyway. I doubt he did anything important after getting those awards. He probably got washed ashore by real life." He snorted again and mumbled, "Like I'd want someone who ended up like *that* as my role model."

Harry nodded, inspecting the book further. Based on the tag, it came from Vauxhall Road, which was, as far as he knew, a Muggle street. Therefore, Riddle either had Muggle ancestry, lived among Muggles or liked them enough to buy in their shops. Looking at it, though, he couldn't help but get a feeling of *déjà vu*, as if he had already seen it somewhere else before.

'Ginny...'

It clicked.

The book he was holding, property of T.M.Riddle, was Ginny's diary!! But why had it been thrown in the toilet? Had someone played a cruel joke on the Slytherin Weasley?

"Say... that's Weasley's, isn't it?" Draco asked, apparently just guessing. Before Harry could stop him, though, the platinum-haired boy snatched the book from his hand and flipped it open.

"That's *private*!!" Harry snapped at his friend, who shrugged.

“So?” He asked with a smirk. “Writing down something you want to keep secret is stupid. It’s probably nothing... that’s weird, there’s nothing in here.”

Curious, Harry took a look – sure enough, the pages were blank, apart from the date: February 19th, 1943.

“Maybe the water washed the ink off?” Harry supposed.

“Um... Harry, the pages are *dry*.” Draco noted, letting go of it and allowing the book to fall in a small splash on the flooded floor. “This isn’t a normal book.”

Harry nodded, bent down and picked it back up. “Probably enchanted... A preserving charm, perhaps... And something to keep its words secret...”

“Or it’s a living book.” Draco supposed, more darkly. “In which case I suggest you let go of it.”

“That’s Ginny’s diary – if it *is* a living book, then I have to know if it’s good or not.” Harry said, slipping it in his bag. “We’ll show this to Hermione – maybe she knows a way to show what’s written.”

Draco snorted. “Right, I can imagine how *that* particular conversation would go: ‘Hey, Granger! Could you show us a spell to help us read the private thoughts of Weasley?’ I can just picture what would happen then.”

Harry nodded. “She’d huff, berate us, take the book and give it back to Ginny pronto.” He sighed. “Guess that idea’s out.”

“Not unless she doesn’t know whose it is, though.” Draco suggested surreptitiously.

Harry snorted. “And once she finds the spell and reads who wrote in it, how utterly pissed to you think she’ll be?”

Draco winced.

“That’s what I thought.” Harry finished in a sigh.

They arrived in the empty classroom only a minute before Blaise did, her hands bandaged with linen and stinking of what probably was a potion, came in with Hermione.

“Guess what, I’m allergic!” Blaise growled as soon as she saw them. “Stupid git could have checked *before* giving us this stupid assignment! Now my hands itch, hurt, they’re bright red and the size of Dursley’s arse! And that salve *stinks!*”

“They’re not *that* big.” Harry noted, before shutting up upon receiving a glare from the frustrated girl who did *not* appreciate being corrected.

“Allergies aren’t common for witches and wizards, Blaise. Our inner magic tends to automatically remove anything harmful from our bodies, unless it’s too strong.” Hermione said, probably quoting from a book, before receiving her own glare and shutting up. Blaise did not appreciate anyone taking Snape’s side, either.

“Tell that to *them*.” She snapped, waving her hands.

The rest of the day passed in the blink of an eye. The great hall was back to normal for supper, to the relief of everyone. Lockhart had apparently *already* forgotten his humiliation, unless he was really good at hiding his emotions – or very talented at grinning stupidly for no other reason than showing his teeth. Hmm, it was probably the last choice.

Harry spotted Ginny sitting with her two friends, giggling at something McKinnon had said, while Chang blinked in confusion. It did not look forced at all, as if a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. He felt a strange feeling at that moment – both relief and worry combined. Relief as thus she was no longer depressed – unless she was hiding it again – and worry because... well...

...he had her diary in his bag. One should not be *happy* when their diary is missing. Perhaps she didn’t know yet? If that was the case, then he would do better to give it back...

But what if she was happy *because* she didn't have it anymore?

He hated to play with guesses. And there was only one way to turn those guesses into certitudes.

*Hello?*

Harry felt rather foolish, writing in the blank book within the comfort of his four poster bed and waiting for an answer. What if the book wasn't magical after all? What if it wasn't the reason? Come to think about it, this couldn't be the only small black book in school, could it? No, Ginny probably still has her perfectly *normal*

---

The message vanished.

...diary. Well, maybe not.

Words suddenly appeared as if someone was pouring ink down from the other side of the page to form words on the front.

*Hello, who are you?*

Harry hesitated. He had no idea of what Riddle's – if his interlocutor was indeed the original owner of the book – intentions were. There were already suspicious things about him – what exactly had happened to him upon coming out of Hogwarts? Someone as brilliant as him simply vanishing like that... and a Slytherin Head boy, to boot... there was no possible way he could have been "washed ashore by real life", as Draco called it. Even though the book was more than fifty years old, there was no way Ginny had not written something about him in it. No, better keep it in the dark.

*Does it matter? Who are you?*

To his annoyance, the book replied: *Does it matter?*

Harry frowned. The book was obviously intelligent. Harry had no wish to reveal his name, but there was no way he could earn its

trust and learn things this way. Shrugging, he decided to take a different approach.

*Not really.* He wrote. *Someone tried to get rid of this – why?*

The answer didn't wait long.

*This journal contains things that happened a long time ago and that many would kill to keep secret. No doubt one of them found it and threw it away.*

Harry felt a sense of familiarity come over him – it felt like 'talking' to the Dark magic lexicon, with a few differences: 'Riddle' used cursive letters in a soft green ink that was pleasant to the eye, whereas the grey-paged book wrote in large, Germanic red letters. It also referred to itself as "it", while his 'teacher' used possessive words to itself.

'There's someone in there.' Was Harry's decision as he read over the line for a second time, thinking of how to phrase his next question.

*What are those secrets?*

Perhaps it was a bit arrogant to believe Riddle would simply hand over his secret like that. It never hurts to be hopeful, though... well, never hurts much.

*Secrets hidden from the public eye. Secrets concerning events that happened fifty years ago, when the chamber of secrets was opened the first time.*

'The chamber was open before?!" He gasped mentally.  
'Riddle' continued to write.

*Secrets... that I will not reveal to just anyone. Your name, for them. Do we have a deal?*

While he had no real intention of revealing his name, he had to admit Riddle had maneuvered him into a verbal impasse. He needed to know, now. Perhaps 'Riddle' even knew where the opening to the chamber was! It was not an occasion he could afford to lose. He was about to write his name, before he hesitated.

*Why is it so important?*

*Names can tell a lot on a person.* ‘Riddle’ cryptically replied.

Harry frowned. Whoever it was, the person behind the pages was good.

*What tells me you will tell me if I tell you?*

*You have my word.*

Harry snorted. *You were a Slytherin head boy.*

*Good point.* The ‘book’ replied good naturedly. *My name is Tom. Tom Marvolo Riddle. Yours?*

Harry sighed. He might as well oblige, if Riddle was going to be stubborn about it.

*Harry.*

*Harry... Potter?*

Alarm bells rang in Harry’s head. The book was fifty years old – there was no possible way Riddle could know about him, unless someone had told him beforehand. His suspicions concerning the book and Ginny solidified. Riddle’s book was, indeed, the Weasley girl’s diary.

‘I’ll just learn what he knows and hide it in my cloak. Nobody will find it.’ Harry decided, dipping his quill in his ink and writing again.

Yes. He wrote. *Will you tell me?*

*I have no reason not to. I keep my word, unless it is to my advantage – what self-respecting Slytherin does not?*

Harry did not reply, but nodded in an agreeing way. If one didn’t respect his own word, then nobody would believe him and he would have one less bargaining chip.

*Back when I was here, they said the chamber of secrets was a legend – a myth. That it did not exist. That was a lie. When I was*

*in my fifth year, someone found and opened the chamber and released the monster inside. It attacked many students and ended up killing one. I managed to catch the one who opened the chamber red-handed and he was expelled.*

*But Professor Dippet, the headmaster at that time, was so ashamed of what had happened that he ordered me never to reveal it – bought it, if you will, with that shiny medal in the trophy room. They were told the girl who died in the bathroom was killed in an unexplainable accident. But I knew this could – and would – happen again. The monster is still alive and the one who has the power to release it was not imprisoned...*

‘He has a flare for the dramatic.’ Harry noted, feeling as if he had stepped in a mystery novel. He didn’t know what to think, though. Yes, that explanation explained a few things, such as the medal for magical merit he Riddle had received. Slowly, he pondered on his next words. Seeing as Riddle was obviously feeling talkative, he decided to push further.

*Who was it?* He simply wrote.

*It’s happening again, isn’t it?*

Harry nodded, before belatedly realizing the futility of the action. Riddle had taken his silence as an answer, though, and continued:

*That’s what I thought. I can show you, if you’d like.*

Harry blinked and had to re-read three times.

*Show me?*

*Yes, show you my memories of the day I caught him. Do you want me to?*

His instincts screamed at him to stop. His mind told him not to trust the book. His curiosity, however, had taken the bait and was being reeled in. Hoping he would not end up gored like a fish, Harry wrote his reply.

*O.K.*

*Please remove your hands from my diary.* Riddle wrote as soon as the ink had disappeared.

Almost as a reflex, Harry obliged upon reading the words. There were none of the grey-paged book's polite words of gratitude, no mentions of noticing the hands were gone, except for the sudden shuffling of the diary's faded, yellow pages. When it settled, Harry had just the time to read the date, June 13, before the pages began to glow. Harry suddenly felt something grab him and pull him forward, directly in the now violently white pages. Blinded by the light, Harry closed his eyes.

The pull suddenly stopped, and Harry found himself falling unceremoniously on cold stone tiles, like the million others covering the floors of the inner castle. Quickly, he pulled himself up, whipping his wand out of his wrist-held holster as he did, before analyzing his surroundings.

He was in an office. It was a small, circular and unfamiliar office with walls covered by portraits of various people, most of them snoozing or sleeping. The one nearest to him bore the name of Dylls Derwent. The setting sun out the large windows piercing the wall section behind the lone desk of the room bathed the room in a brilliant red color. Something in the room was giving him a chill in his back, though, and his forehead felt oddly warm, as if he was getting ready to cast a dark magic spell.

A lone, small, wrinkled and except for one or two rare white hair, nearly bald old man was sitting at the desk, reading a letter. He looked extremely weary, as if he had not had a wink of sleep in the past week; the bags under his eyes were so large they could have been used as broom closets. He also appeared to have taken no notice whatsoever of Harry's stumbling arrival in his office, even though he had certainly not been silent about it.

'This must be what he meant, show me... this must be Hogwarts, fifty years in the past.' He mused silently, looking about. One of the old people in a portrait behind the man was reading the letter over his shoulder, looking grave, but, even though Harry was almost directly in its field of vision, he took no notice. Harry found it a bit unsettling.

Curious about the content of the oh-so-grave letter, Harry headed behind the desk and attempted to read...

...but it was blank.

‘Of course, I’m in a memory! Riddle has no idea what is in the letter, so I can’t read it.’ He mused, frowning. There went a possible source of information.

Only now did he notice something. The portraits, the clouds, the old man, even the flying owl outside the window... everything was frozen still, as if time had stopped for everything but him.

And, suddenly, someone knocked on the door. The owl’s wings took a beat; the old man’s eyes drifted down a line; a portrait’s character’s quill moved an inch. It was like someone had played the “play” button on a video flick. Looking up, the old man said in a haggard voice,

“Enter.”

A young man stepped through the open door. Harry immediately noticed there were many similarities between them – both of them had rather messy black hair and a relatively short and thin figure. That was where the likeness ended, however. The shape of the young man’s face was very different, and he was much older and taller, standing a bit more than a foot taller than the young twelve years old. There was also a shiny prefect badge on his chest.

“Ah, Riddle.” The old man said, rubbing his temples.

“You wanted to see me, professor Dippet?” “Riddle” asked, looking a bit nervous.

‘That’s why the memories started...’ Harry mused. ‘Until now, the room’s appearance and everything else was guesswork from him.’

“Sit down,” Dippet said, motioning wearily to a chair set in front of his desk, “I read the letter you sent me.”

“Oh...” Riddle sat down, his hands clenching in each other over his knees, “and...?”

“And, my dear boy, I’m afraid I just can’t allow you to stay at school over the summer. Surely you want to go home for the holidays?”

“No,” Riddle said immediately and assuredly, answering the same way as Harry would have had he been asked to go to the Dursley’s for the winter, “I’d much rather stay here at Hogwarts than go back to that... to that...”

“You said you live in a Muggle orphanage during the holidays, didn’t you?” Dippet asked interestedly.

“Yes sir.” Riddle’s face reddened in shame, as if embarrassed by that fact.

“And you are muggle-born?”

‘Why would he care...?’ Harry wondered.

“Half,” The young man replied quickly. “My mother was a witch.”

“And your parents are both...”

“My mother died soon after I was born – she barely had enough time to give me my name: Tom from my father, Marvolo from my grandfather.”

Dippet nodded. “Normally, we could have arranged for you to stay here this summer, but I’m afraid in the current circumstances...”

“The attacks, you mean?” Tom queried.

Harry felt his heart skip a beat. That clenched it – this was Hogwarts, when the chamber was opened the first time, fifty years ago. Riddle hadn’t been lying.

But then, it meant that he *had* caught the culprit, and that he was still somewhere out there. Perhaps the reason the name of

Tom Marvolo Riddle had never been heard outside of Hogwarts afterwards was because he was hiding from the original heir.

"Yes," somberly replied 'Dippet'. "Precisely. My dear boy, you must see how foolish it would be of me to allow you to remain at the castle when term ends. Particularly in the light of the recent tragedy ... the death of that poor girl ... You will be safer by far at your orphanage. As a matter of fact, the Ministry of Magic is even now talking about closing the school. We are no nearer locating the - er - source of all this unpleasantness ..."

"Sir – if the person was caught... if it all stopped..." Tom supposed with hope in his voice.

"What do you mean?" Dippet demanded, sitting straighter on the old, used chair. "Riddle, do you know something about these attacks?"

"No, sir." Riddle quickly replied.

'That's a lie.' Harry immediately thought. The answer had been too quick... too nervous to be honest.

Dippet did not see through it, however. He sank back in his chair, looking dejected and haggard.

"You may go, Tom."

Riddle got up and left. Following his insatiable curiosity, Harry followed him closely. On the way out, Harry gave a look at the plate adorning the door, from the other side:

Headmaster A.Dippet.

'The headmaster's office...' Harry thought, filing the information for later. Quickly before he lost the older boy, Harry trailed him down the dizzyingly twisty flight of stairs and past the statue of a gargoyle, which he remembered once seeing on the second floor. The halls were empty of life, as if nobody wanted to be out, even before the sun had set completely. Harry couldn't resist a shiver at the sights of the virtually dead hall and the echoing sound of Riddle's footsteps on the cold stone tiles.

Would Hogwarts, the place he considered his home, end up this way if the heir managed to kill someone this time? He had no illusions on Dumbledore's predicament should such an event happen. He would simply not be able to hold the proverbial dam of silence up, and the following flood of information would no doubt kick even him out of the office.

Harry's forehead was starting to feel very hot, yet it did not prevent him from shuddering involuntarily.

They reached the great hall, which looked very much like it did in the present days – Valentine decorations excluded. A tall wizard with auburn hair and a long beard called Riddle.

"What are you doing, wandering around this late, Tom?"

Harry knew he had seen that man somewhere before... those blue eyes...

He gaped. That was Dumbledore, fifty years younger!

"I had to see the headmaster, sir." Tom replied.

"Well, hurry off to bed," Dumbledore gave one of his piercing looks to Tom. "Best not roam the corridors these days. Not since..." A long, shuddering sigh. "...well, good night."

And he strode away, leaving Riddle and Harry alone. Tom waited until he was gone before he left as well, toward the dungeons. Following, Harry noticed the path did not seem to lead toward his common room. For a moment, he thought Riddle would inadvertently show him a secret passage he hadn't learned yet, but as they went through the twisty, cold and dimly lit corridors of the dungeons, it became evident that the taller boy was not going to the common room. In fact, he recognized the path as one he took every time he had to go from the great hall to Snape's classroom.

Strangely enough, the boy hid himself in the exact same room where, fifty years later, his greasy-haired head of house would teach his classes. After noticing that Tom was doing nothing but wait for *someone* to walk in the halls, Harry decided to wait outside and to try to organize his thoughts.

What were they doing down here? Was the chamber somewhere close by? Who was the heir, and how had he managed to get back in the school unnoticed after all those years? Surely a sixty-something years old man couldn't just walk in like that – especially one who had been expelled in the past.

There was a possibility that the heir had transfigured himself into a child, but he doubted such a thing was very likely. If hiding your age was this easy, why didn't everyone do it?

The only new adult in the school this year was Lockhart. Harry nearly burst out laughing at the thought – Lockhart was not only too young, but he was far too much of a bumbling incompetent to even *manage* something like that. Besides, there was no reason.

Let's see... who did he know could be over sixty years old, and hated muggles? Dumbledore, that much was certain. Harry wouldn't have been surprised if the man had seen the founding of London. But there mere thought of Dumbledore attacking students was ludicrous.

McGonagall as well, but for the heir of Slytherin to be the head of Gryffindor and ruthlessly fair to everyone was ridiculous.

Flitwick, perhaps, but imagining the tiny professor guiding students to their deaths... that mental picture was also laughable.

Filch...? Filch hated students enough, and could easily be over sixty years old, even with the wizarding people's evidently extended lifespans. However, the first victim had been his cat, to whom he was nearly holding a cult. Scratch that idea.

Mrs Zabini? Hell no. Not sixty, not at school and *definitely* not a Muggle-hater. More like a Muggle-lover, or perhaps 'Lover-of-a-muggle'.

The Weasleys, with the number of kids they had, could easily reach the age. But, like Blaise's mother, were not in school, and Mr Weasley... if Filch formed a cult to his cat, Mr Weasley was devoted to understanding the mysteries of Muggles and electricity.

Who else.... ...no, he couldn't really think of--

His musings were interrupted when a massive shadow appeared down the hallway.

'Hagrid?!'

It was him. There was no mistaking him – that enormous bulk of his was hard to miss. Wide enough to block more than half the hallway by himself and having to bend down a bit to avoid hitting the ceiling, he was dressed in a Gryffindor-crested version of the Hogwarts robes that could easily house even Dudley and his face was, amazingly enough, almost shaven. He had the same small black eyes Harry remembered, though, darting nervously about, as if he was somewhere he wasn't supposed to be.

Hagrid... Hagrid had been expelled, that much Harry knew. He also knew, through extremely simple guesswork, that the remains of his wand were hidden inside the pink umbrella he had once used to open the magical gates to Diagon Alley. No normal umbrella would do that. Hagrid, based on what he was seeing now, was also over sixty years old, although he looked to be on the better half of his forties.

As Hagrid passed in front of the classroom and walked ahead and Tom soon came out of the classroom to follow him, realization began to dawn on Harry. But Hagrid had never shown any signs of hating muggles – Uncle Vernon excepted and to be taken as a very bad example of the opposite. Harry had also been with him during the third attack...

...no he hadn't. He had been with Snape, and had left Hagrid soon before. He would have had enough time to find the chamber and use—

That made no sense.

Fluffy...

Ok, so Hagrid did love monsters and claimed that Dragons, who were some of the most violent and dangerous creatures in existence made cute, gentle and cuddly pets. Perhaps not in so

many words, but it was intended. But even he would not keep a monster that attacked students for no other reason than killing.

Keeping these thoughts in mind, Harry followed Tom on the trace of the loud footsteps of the large boy, deeper down in the dungeons than Harry had ever been. Tom stopped on the corner of some kind of large antechamber. Harry, though, perfectly knowing that nothing could affect him in the memory, continued forward and looked. Hagrid was kneeling in the open door on the other side of the room, holding a box.

"C'mon, gotta get yeh outta here ... c'mon now ... in the box ..."

Harry suddenly found felt like he was pushed aside by a tangible bubble of air as Tom burst out of hiding, directly where Harry was standing. The twelve years old boy managed to right himself against the wall in time to watch the rest of the scene unfold.

"Evening, Rubeus." Tom said, confirming Harry's suspicions.

Hagrid slammed the door shut, whirled around and asked: "What yer doin' down here, Tom?"

"It's all over," Tom said, taking a calculated step forward. "I'm going to have to turn you in, Rubeus. They're talking about closing Hogwarts if the attacks don't stop."

"What d'yeh--"

"I don't think," Tom interrupted, "that you had any intention of killing anyone. But monsters don't make good pets. I suppose you must have let it out to stretch its legs a bit..."

"It hasn't killed an'one!" Hagrid declared, his back against the door, which began to make odd clicking sounds.

"Come on, Rubeus. Don't be difficult," Tom said, taking a few more steps. "The dead girl's parents will be here tomorrow. The

least Hogwarts can do is make sure that the thing that killed their daughter is slaughtered ..."

"It wasn't him!" Hagrid protested in a shout. "He wouldn't! He never!"

"Stand aside," Riddle snapped, taking out his wand from a holster on his waist. A brilliant flame shot out, illuminating the room. The door shot open so hard that Hagrid was sent against the wall. And beyond the door was... something. Looking it over quickly, Harry noticed three things that stood out.

It had eight legs, covered in black spine-like hair,

It had eight glittering black eyes that seemed to glow in the renewed darkness of the antechamber,

And it had two long, pointy and hooked fangs that Harry did *not* want anywhere near his person.

It was a spider.

Ok, so, it was *four* things and an opinion. Sue me.

Riddle lifted his wand to inflict the killing blow, but was too slow – the spider shot out of the room at blinding speed brought by desperation, running along the walls and leaping down the corridor. Tom pointed his wand at it, but...

"NOOOOO!!!"

The massive figure of Hagrid rammed right into him, messing his aim and allowing the monster to escape...

And suddenly, everything twisted on itself and Harry found himself back in his bed, his throat constricting in an effort to hold the rising bile down.

Based on what Tom showed him, Hagrid, the monster-lover who had once cared for Fluffy, the giant three-headed dog, and

attempted to keep Norbert, a baby dragon, as a pet, had opened the chamber to release the creature hiding in it.

...said like that, it made a sick kind of sense.

Let's rephrase this:

Hagrid, who had once pushed Vernon across the entrance hall of #4, privet Drive, was the heir of Slytherin, whose mission it was to rid the school of everyone with muggle blood.

...I said it before, using Vernon as proof of anything was a *bad* idea.

Again: Hagrid, who was one of the most harmless and rather misunderstood people Harry knew, had been found by Tom Riddle, the Slytherin Head boy and mysterious vanishing genius, with a monster, and immediately been pointed at as the culprit, even though the monster had escaped.

Ah, that was better.

Harry had no illusions – Tom had attempted to lie to him. While the theory of Hagrid opening the chamber and releasing the monster made a little bit of sense, there was no reason why he, who was obviously a Gryffindor and thus could not be the heir of Slytherin, hadn't ended up being the first victim. Not of the chamber's monster, but of Tom. And besides, he would not do the same thing twice. He was not the brightest light bulb in the pack, but he was not dumb, either.

No. He knew he was being lied to. Perhaps the best choice was to ask Hagrid, himself. But every time Harry had attempted to steer the conversation on the reason of his expulsion – or any other "touchy" subject – the large man would clamp up and would not say a thing until the subject was changed. And Harry did not want to trick his friend into getting drunk to get his answers – which was, from what he had heard, a good way of pumping for information.

The monster was also a mystery. If Hagrid was not guilty, then the spider he had seen was not the creature in the chamber

of secrets. It made sense – why would Salazar Slytherin choose a spider to represent his scourge, after all?

Then, came Tom's part in this. He had obviously known about it for a long time, based on the way he had acted. His words upon catching Hagrid red-handed had been too fluid, too calculated to be improvised. There was also the mystery of *why* he had let Hagrid's monster attack people, if he was to be believed, up until a student was killed, and only acted then. Perhaps an act of revenge against Hagrid, waiting until things got to the extreme to act and ensure his expulsion?

They had been on first name basis, as well. Scratch the idea of revenge – Hagrid apparently thought of him as a friend before that.

He did not want to talk to Tom any longer. The lie he had been told might have passed by someone less in control of his emotions or less observant, but Harry prided himself on those budding talents he had developed in his two years at Hogwarts. Sure, it came to a shock, but after being poisoned the previous year, he wasn't just going to believe someone he didn't even know properly, much less someone who was surrounded by mystery, like *him*.

With that in mind, Harry shut the diary, pulled open his curtain, allowing a bit of chilly winter night air to pass through, lifted the lid of his trunk open and stuffed the diary as deep as he could inside it. He hoped he would never have to see the diary of Tom Marvolo Riddle again.

“Perfect weather for a Quidditch match!”

Oliver Wood, who probably would say the same thing about a hurricane, Harry Potter et la Chambre des Secrets, page 267

## **Chapter 18: Birds hide to die**

Aunt Petunia was yelling at him again. He could not tell about what, simply that she was yelling. Standing behind her, his pudgy cousin was laughing, a melting ice cream cone in his hand, looking so tasty, so sweet... and so unreachable...

Aunt Marge strode through the front door like she owned the place, a huge dog nearly as tall as he was following her, glaring angrily at him with small, golden eyes...

Holding on the tree for dear life, wailing in fear as the furious dog snarled, teeth bared and droll dripping down its chin and into the freshly cut grass... yet his cousin still laughed... still stuffing his face with sweets that he knew he would never be allowed to touch...

His forehead was burning under his bandanna as his depression and anger grew. It was not physically painful, not exactly pleasant either. However, he felt like he was voluntarily twisting a jagged knife inside his heart. His wand was cold to the point of freezing his hands. Before him, the dark magic lexicon, grey-pages and politeness and all, was lying open.

A shapeless blob appeared.

Harry Potter took a deep breath:

*"Imperio!"*

The strangest feeling came over him... he felt like he had two bodies, as if his mind was split between the two. Yet he could only move one body if he concentrated. And the other felt cramped, as if his presence was pushing away the target's essence, or thoughts, to take its body and control it like a lifeless puppet.

'Probably what I'm doing, actually,' he reflected, idly rubbing the burning under his black bangs.

And on top of that, the familiar and exceptionally pleasant feeling of extreme power, of control, of freedom came over him.

"Jump."

A push came through the other half of his mind.

The blob jumped. It was definitely not an appealing sight.

Harry Potter smiled weakly as it vanished in a puff and his mind returned to normal. He had managed the spell correctly.

There were no nods of appreciations or said 'well done's from his teacher in this shifty, dangerous area of magic. However, the page he had been reading ten minutes ago turned slowly in a silent sign of approval. The book, when teaching, was very professional and colder than usual. Curious, Harry read the page, absorbed the information it held. It was a text. A long, detailed text on the history of the Imperius curse – the book had a tendency to force him through the theory after learning the practical. It was a rather unorthodox way of doing things, but who was Harry to ask for anything else?

**The imperius curse is the only mind control spell in existence. By pushing aside the mind of the target, it allows one to take complete control of the target's actions and movements and make them do anything, even if it is something they would normally never do. The simpler the mind of the target, the easier it is for the caster to maintain his**

**or her hold on the target. However, it is ill advised to try this curse on one with a complex mind – a wizened war veteran or one exceptionally intelligent – for they might prove resistant to its effect. Stubbornness can also be an efficient defensive trait against it.**

**Unfortunately, the spell's effectiveness is minimal in an interrogation situation, as it does not allow the caster to search through the target's mind, merely control the body. It cannot be used to ask for the truth, nor can it be used to learn new information. It is also impossible to force the target to do something its body cannot naturally handle.**

The text was long, hard and cold, like the rest of the book. The following pages gave various examples of times when the curse had been used in the past: Quidditch game in 1643, taking control of a seeker to make him miss the snitch intentionally; French minister of magic elections of 1712, forcing voters to take for the same candidate; French minister of magic elections of 1722, forcing voters to take for another candidate to incriminate him; some Austrian Vampire slayer who used it to make his kills easier in 1782, the shadow wars of the 1940s, when Grindelwald brought the curse back to popularity by using it on a bunch of important muggles to start a great war; Voldemort's rise in the 1970s—

Somehow, Harry was not surprised to see the name present. The book, though it had admitted having spent the last fifty years stuck in the restricted section of the library, was very well informed on relatively recent events. How? Harry didn't know.

And he was not going to lie to himself by saying it did not worry him a bit. A book, especially one on the dark arts, should not have the means to look about and learn, no matter how strange that sounded.

Two pages later, Harry finally could stop reading. The book shifted back to its second page, where a message appeared:

**That will be all for tonight.**

Grateful, Harry nodded. He knew the book could 'see' it.

**You have done very well, few have progressed at the speed you have.**

He didn't know whether to be glad, proud or worried about being a fast learner in dark magic. He settled for hesitant gratefulness.

*Thank you,* he wrote back.

There was no response. For a few moments, Harry thought of asking the dark magic lexicon about the diary of Tom Riddle, but hesitated. The sun was starting to shine through the thin windows of the dormitory and peek through his curtains, indicating that his 'study time' was closing into an end. Besides, he had Quidditch practice soon.

After stuffing the book inside the silvery folds of his invisibility cloak, Harry got up and got dressed, noting that the rest of the boys were still asleep. Flint had, for once, booked the pitch early in the morning, "As soon as the sun decides to show its lazy arse", and told them all to be there "or else you'll help Bole and Derrick to practice their swing's power!". While Harry knew Flint's threats were not to be ignored, he also knew that his captain didn't want to incapacitate his seeker, not the day before the match against the Ravenclaws.

With all the action that had happened lately, Harry had almost forgotten about Quidditch. The match between Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff had been extremely quick and in favor of the Ravens, who were now Slytherin's best contenders for the cup. Winning the next match was important, for it would pretty much decide who would win. Harry had no intention of letting the match be his first defeat.

The first order of business was waking Draco up. Grinning mischievously, Harry turned to the top of his bed.

"Nemesis, go wake Draco up."

The five foot long constrictor snake shot Harry a dry look.  
"Whhy can't'chya do it hhhyourssself?"

"It's more fun that way," Harry replied, grinning. "Besides, I know you just love his face when you do it."

Nemesis let out a chuckle – the sound being very odd in Parseltongue – that could be easily referred to as sadistic. Agilely, the snake leaped from the top of Harry's bed like a spring, whirling his body around the poster of Draco's bed. And, slowly, Harry lost track of his pet, watching only its shadow slowly slide down the pole, hanging by its tail. Twice, his tongue flickered across the platinum-haired boy's nose, and—

"ARGHHHHH!!!"

"Whuzzat?" Came a voice in Crabbe's bed, while Goyle let out a thunderous groan and turned around on his bed, snuggling further in his blankets.

Draco almost ripped the curtains open, jumped out of his bed and landed unceremoniously on his butt between his and Harry's bed, while the black-haired boy laughed.

"Potter, I am going to *kill* that snake of yours!!"

"Jussst try, blondie." Nemesis replied, although nobody but Harry understood.

"You do that," Harry replied, "after Quidditch practice. Remember Flint?"

"Ah, right." Draco replied, yawning and rubbing the back of his head, messing up his usually flawless hair further while scratching his stomach through the thin cloth of his dark green night robe. "Gimme a minute."

"Two seconds." Harry replied, throwing him his broom and taking his own Nimbus 2000. "It's for your own good."

"Remind me why I joined the team already?"

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[Extracted from Harry Potter's diary, 15/03/93]

Flint is crazy. I said it before, many times, actually, and I'll say it again: he's a few twigs short of a broomstick. Bad enough that he practically gives our beaters a license to kill us – excluding himself, of course – but he pushed the murder attempts until the bell rang to tell us we had five minutes to get to class; and were still in the air!

Fortunately, we started off with Snape. Although walking in the middle of his explaining how porcupine quills interact with aconite in a brew based on peeled Abyssinian Shrivelfig – something about blue smoke, sparks and, if the student has a family name starting with L, the instant destruction of the cauldron – we didn't get punished. If I had tried that stunt last year, I would have been skinned alive. I guess it's a good thing that thing with Quirrell happened, then... well, relatively, that is. It was almost worth being forever afflicted with a turban-phobia, whatever's the real word for that. If there is one.

The rest of the day passed quickly... well, except for History of Magic. I have no idea how Binns can remember all of that by heart – he can't really turn the pages to his notes, now, can he? – it's like he has no life. Well... as a matter of speaking, that is.

As for our Duel club, it's going along nicely. Blaise had us learn a wrist-locking spell that I found easy to cast. Except for Hermione, naturally, I was nearly the fastest of our group to learn it. Normally, that honor would be Xu's, but she's been having trouble lately with learning new spells. It's like her technique is so ingrained in her body that she has trouble changing it. Well, that's what I suppose. I'm no expert.

After that, that sadistic friend of mine had us cast the spell repeatedly and as quickly as we could on a freshly transfigured dummy of Lockhart – a target dummy, not a dummy Lockhart... although it could be a target dummy of a dummy Lockhart. Oh, back to the point.

Yes, I'm going somewhere.

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*“Dextera Mortis!” “Dextera Mortis!”*

The six children had their wands pointed at various brightly-clad man-sized figures that had been rather fluffy pillows, themselves transfigured from the damaged, splintered wooden chairs that had been housed in the classroom. The figures had long, blonde hair, wore colors that would have made even a blind man cringe (somehow), large, goofy-looking grins – with two large, square canines protruding from the top like their namesake – and enormous, exaggerated hands, slowly rotating on their wrists.

*“Dextera Mortis!” “Dextera Mortis!”*

Curses were flying with loud detonations and flashes of dazzling orange bolts of light. Each time a target was hit, the hands would flash brightly in deepening colors, depending on the precision of the spell’s aim. Aiming at the arms would bring the best results – a dark red color that reached into the blacks – while hitting the feet, as demonstrated by Emma when she exaggerated the wrist flick, gave no reaction at all.

*“Dextera Mortis!” “Dextera Mortis!”*

Harry’s aim was flawless. If there was one thing he was good at, it was that, at least. His technique perhaps wasn’t as refined as Blaise’s or Hermione’s, but he definitely had learned the first lesson in targeting: “Point the pointy end at what you want to hit”, which he did very well.

*“Dextera Mortis!”* He screamed once again, sending yet another blast of orange light at the Lockhart-shaped dummy. Sternum hit, red light, medium effect. It had been exactly where he had aimed, however. He gave a look at Hermione, who shot the curse herself with minimum effort, accidentally missing and hitting the blackboard instead, causing a sizzle of smoke and leaving a small, unnoticeable black burn mark. The girl’s bangs were wet from sweat, her aim sloppy and her technique more flaggy than usual. She was visibly exhausted.

*“Dextera Mortis!” “Dextera Mortis!”*

Harry's arm was starting to tingle from magical fatigue; the curse was evidently very draining, most likely because of the small area of effect. However, he noticed he was nowhere as bad as the others – even Blaise was panting a bit, yet the only thing he felt was a cold numbness in his wand arm.

"Dexte—Oh, whatever." He heard Emma say, before she sat down on one of the cheap wooden chairs of the classroom, looking positively knackered. Hermione was next to give up, followed nearly immediately and surprisingly by Blaise, but not before Harry started to feel quite tired. Xu stopped soon afterwards, giving a tired sigh and nearly falling on top of McKinnon.

"What the hell..." Draco panted as he, too, gave up and sat down. "Aren't you even tired?"

Harry nodded. His wand arm felt like it had been lifting a heavy box for thirty minutes; just the light pressure of his wand felt like a ton. As for his other arm, and the rest of his body for that matter, it felt like lead. Yet he felt like he could still cast the spell a few more times.

"I am," He replied truthfully. "But not enough to give up..."

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[Harry Potter's diary resumes:]

I couldn't cast many more after that, but I still ended up standing the longest. Hermione theorized I have more basic power than the rest of them, but shouldn't that mean that I should be extremely good at Dueling and everything else? I mean...

Oh, maybe it's my... forbidden studies. I doubt it though; my scar didn't heat up once, the whole time. And I didn't get that great feeling, either. Or maybe that's just because the spell I was casting wasn't dark magic?

March 14 1993

March 15 1993

I kinda forgot to write in this yesterday... not like I could, Flint pulled us out of the great hall with our breakfasts in our hands, and didn't let us go until we went to sleep. I'm still knackered and sore, but you should see the other seeker. He's still down for the count, from the rumors.

He gave us a long, long, long pep-talk about Slytherin honor – pardon me while I cough, we are not Gryffindors here – the importance of keeping the cup, if only for our pride, and a detailed threat telling us exactly what would happen to all of us if we lost.

He sure has a creative mind, I'll give him that.

Things got worse when we walked out; the wind was starting up and blowing strong already. The rest of the team – bar Draco, that is – didn't care, they were all bulky enough to resist the wind easily. Problem for me, I'm about as light as a feather. I mean, I kicked off the ground and I was nearly sent against the stands!

I didn't watch much of the match, actually. Just the commentary, said by Lee Jordan and watched over by the head of Gryffindor – so Jordan could pretty much say whatever he wanted, which he did. I actually stopped listening when he compared Draco to a top when he got caught in a windblast.

Oh yeah, I need to remember to cut my hair. I still haven't got around to it. Maybe I'll have Hermione do it – I'm sure she'd know a charm for that. And I trust her not to give me a bowlcut.

Oh, getting off subject here. Ok, so. Resume of what was happening; I was getting blown all over the field by that bloody wind – I'm pretty sure more than half the moving I did wasn't thanks to my broom – the other seeker was heavier than me, so he had less trouble, and neither of us had seen the snitch. Heck, by then. I was almost sure the snitch had been blown out of the field.

The score was at 60-50 for the ravens – mostly because of the wind blowing toward our side – when I spotted the snitch for the first time. It was near the patch of sand on the Raven's side, on the other side of the field from where I was. The other seeker had a head start to it, too. Not that big, but I only caught him thanks to

the fact that my broom is faster. By then, we were about ten feet above the ground.

Unfortunately, I ended up flying on top of the other seeker, and there just wasn't any way I could get to the side without losing some distance ahead.

I knew that the other seeker did not want the game to pause for a penalty shot – not that I did – and I knew of a certain rule in the game that said that a player cannot touch any part of the other player's anatomy. So, I put my leg straight in his path. If he touched me, it would have been considered Blatching and might have given Ravenclaw a penalty shot, but it was better than them catching the Snitch and winning.

Just as I thought he would, he went lower to avoid touching me. I *could* have just taken the lead and snatched the snitch, but by forehead heated up and... I dunno, at that moment, the snitch didn't really seem all that important. I just... don't really know why I did that, actually, but...

...I swerved down with him, and I didn't stop until he plowed into the grass. And Hooch didn't have time to blow her whistle before I caught the snitch, almost as an afterthought. The game ended 210-60 (Flint pulled his copyrighted "I-score-while-no-one-cares" technique again) for us, and the other seeker ended up taken to the hospital wing with a broken leg, arm and rib. I hadn't really realized we had been going *that* fast. He could have been more seriously hurt than that – I don't think madam Pomfrey can heal a broken neck.

The folks of Slytherin didn't care about doing that to the other seeker – actually, I lost count of the number of congratulations I got, he's not very popular, apparently – but I did.

So what if Draco didn't agree with me, so what if Blaise thought I was thick for thinking that... I normally don't do something violent like that for no reason. I could have just as easily taken the snitch without 'taking out the opposition' like I did. Instead, I deliberately forced the other seeker in a suicide dive. And I felt happy after. Glad I had done it.

I'm starting to scare myself.

~Harry Potter

[End of entry]

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Harry sighed and put his quill back into his holder to make sure it did not stain anything. With one movement, he closed his diary, knowing the magical ink was already dry. He gave a louder sigh and looked outside of the window of the empty classroom, of which he was the only occupant. The sun was just about to set, bathing the room in a reddish hue that felt fitting for the occasion.

What exactly had pushed him to do that? The match had been the previous day, but until now, his housemate's celebrating had prevented him from really using that useful thing that was stuck in his skull. And now that he had the occasion, he was using it.

The maneuver he had used was downright cheating and unfair, which was overlooked simply because of the fact that his team was infamous for doing exactly that. He had given the Ravenclaw seeker no choice on how to avoid him – they had been too low for him to be able to barrel away, and swerving sideways would have caused him to touch Harry's leg with his head or shoulders, which would have halted the game.

But by the time Harry was on level with the snitch, he had been close enough to catch it without problem. That much he had written in his diary.

What he hadn't written, though, was the fact that he had felt... an urge, a compulsion; the undeniable need to see the other seeker crashing into the ground. It took only an instant, a single second... a mere, unnecessary push of half an inch down on his broom... the satisfying sound of broom hitting grass at thunderous speeds, the fainting sound of someone tumbling, a distinct cracking... the cold feeling of the snitch against the palm of his

hand, an instant before Hooch's whistle rang to signal a penalty shot that would never take place...

...and a feeling of cold dread that took over his body as he looked behind him, where his Ravenclaw counterpart was sprawled across the grass, whimpering in pain, holding his arm bent at a strange angle, while the rest of his team flew down worriedly... those accusing glances in their eyes directed at him...

Harry shook his head, trying to shake off the surfacing feeling of guilt. He had done well – his team had won. That was the Slytherin motto, wasn't it? To win, no matter the means.

Then, there was the familiar “dark magic” heat from his scar. How was that connected? Had he accidentally reached into a spell? Perhaps he had been affected by one, which had controlled him to crash the other seeker...

...perhaps he should ask the only expert on dark magic he knew? Well... the only expert on dark magic he knew that wasn't out to *kill* him, that is...

He sighed. Well, it was no use to worry about that now – maybe later. Right now, all he could do about it was mull over the problem and look at every ugly part of it. And honestly, there wasn't all that much to look at.

“I must have slipped.” He told himself. It was, after all, only half an inch... Perfectly reasonable to think it was an accident, right?

...right.

“Harry!!” Draco's voice broke in as the platinum-haired boy burst in the empty classroom, out of breath. “Our dorms... Somebody sneaked in and spilled your stuff everywhere!!”

Stuck by panic, Harry stood and quickly ran out, bee-lining for the common room, barely registering Draco following him and asking him to slow down.

The dorm was an absolute mess. Clothes he recognized as his had been thrown all over the floor and even on the other beds. His curtains were open, his bed sheets had been thrown off violently. His books had been thrown everywhere, *Quidditch through the ages* having landed, ironically enough, on top of Draco's bed poster while Harry found *Wandering with Werewolves* in the trash can.

"Oi, Potter!" Crabbe called. "You mind calming that bloody snake down?" He pointed at one of the sheets, which was wiggling violently and where loud hissing came in a voice only Harry could understand:

"GET SSAT SSSSING OFFFF ME AND I'LL SSSTOP ASSSKING, YA BRAIN-DAMAGED IMBESSSSILE!!!"

Chuckling, Harry pulled the sheet off, untangling the snake that fell in a tangled mass on the ground.

"Did you see who did it?" He asked his pet.

"Did what?" Nemesis asked, before looking around and letting out an odd impressed hiss-whistle that must have sounded very peculiar to non-parselmouths. Then again, it sounded weird to Harry's ears, too. "Sssomeone made a messss..."

"Tell me about it." Harry sighed, turning to Draco. "He didn't see a thing."

"Well, sssee, there'ss a sssock right offfer here, under that shhhirt..." Nemesis told him about the mess and was pointedly ignored.

"Rats." The other boy said, clicking his fingers. "I wanted to teach whoever did this a lesson on how to treat allies of the Malfoy clan."

"Did they take anything?" Crabbe asked, looking about.

"...and another book by the idiot here, besssidess those boksserss..."

Harry quickly checked. His invisibility cloak was there, so was his broom. His two most expensive possessions were still there, so whoever had done this didn't have petty theft on their mind.

He could not, however, find Tom Riddle's Diary, and...

...the *Dark Magic Lexicon* was gone.

Harry's blood froze. His name was written on his trunk, so whoever had stole it knew who it belonged to. And while the Dark magic lexicon had the ability to change his cover, he sincerely doubted it could change what was inside its pages. He was about to check everywhere again when a hand fell on his shoulder.

"Are you looking for this?" Draco asked, showing him the same book had had been searching for. At his reassured face, Draco smirked and said, in a hush, "I still don't get why you still care about that stupid diary..."

Harry blinked in confusion. What was he talking about? Nevertheless, he picked up the dark magic lexicon and stuffed it back in his trunk, hidden under his invisibility cloak.

Then it clicked. The only stupid diary Draco knew of...

"I still think Riddle has something to do with what's going on." Harry replied smoothly, hiding his quickly resurfacing panic. That's right, the diary was gone!!

Draco smirked and shrugged nonchalantly. "So, is anything else missing?"

'Yes, the book you think you just handed me.' Harry replied mentally. "I don't think so... Maybe they stole a pair of socks..."

"Right, they walk in, incapacitate your snake – which is something I *have* to try, by the way – put this place upside-down to just walk out with a *pair of socks*, of all things."

"I'd like to sssee you try incapsititating *me!*" Nemesis protested hotly, turning around the blonde threateningly.

"I was being sarcastic." Harry replied.

Draco smirked. "I know." He let out a gargantuan yawn then walked over to his bed, carefully avoiding stepping on the snake in his way. "Anyway, I'm knackered. If someone makes me drink another Butterbeer for that Porskoff Ploy, I'm going to spew."

He almost sounded like he minded, but Harry deeply knew his friend was an incurable attention-seeker, and was deeply enjoying the fame his Quidditch position gave him.

Harry managed a genuine smile at that. "Just be careful to do it on your own stuff."

Draco slipped his curtains open, then pulled out one of Harry's shirts that had landed there. "With the way you clean your things? That might be a tad bit much to ask."

Catching the piece of clothing, Harry pulled his tongue at his friend, who chuckled and sealed his curtains behind him. After stuffing the shirt in his trunk, Harry laid back in his own bed, frowning. What on earth was going on? Who had stolen the diary? How had they known about it?

More questions... yet no answers.

Harry groaned. He felt a headache coming. And it had nothing to do with his scar, for once.

“We found them near the library...”

Minerva McGonagall, Harry Potter et la Chambre des Secrets, page 270

## **Chapter 19: The fourth attack**

The common room was particularly lively, early that morning. Students were in a good mood, and Harry found himself being patted on the back more than even after the match. The reason why was because Ravenclaw was still missing a Seeker, theirs having been extremely roughened up. He had gained consciousness the very same morning, but madam Pomfrey had declared him unfit to be moved, and that he probably wouldn't be able to play Quidditch for a month.

And naturally, as every juicy rumors do at Hogwarts, it spread like wildfire. Now, everyone knew what was going on – one version of it or another.

Problem was: in one week was the Quidditch match between them and Gryffindor, who had faired so abysmally bad against the Hufflepuffs, since Spinnet had sprained her wrist and McDonald had been knocked out early on – rumors say they had to catch Wood from drowning himself in the showers afterwards – and neither team had a chance of actually winning the cup. Whichever way the game went, Slytherin was keeping its title for the ninth year in a row.

Harry smiled and nodded at the praise, but his mind wasn't in it. A full week had passed since his trunk had been vandalized and

the diary of Tom Riddle stolen, and yet he still had no clue of who had done it. After ample reflection, he decided that, of everyone in Slytherin, Ginny was the most likely one to have done it, if only to keep what she had written away from him. Although how she knew he had gained possession of it, he had no idea.

Xu and Emma were both sitting together, doing homework. Ginny was somewhere else by herself, as he had noticed she was doing more and more often. He had to admit he was getting worried about her. Seriously worried. There was an almost... vacant look in her eyes, now, and whenever she smiled, even a blind man would have plainly seen the strain.

Harry, Draco and Blaise were sitting on the sofa close to the fire, studying for their approaching end-of-the-year exams – Hermione had practically torn their arms off to make them start a whole month early.

At least, in theory they were.

In reality, Blaise spent most of the time ranting about the unfairness of giving exams while students were being petrified left and right, Draco was bragging about something he had done when he was little – if one actually believed him, one would start to think he had been a little superhero and was now retired – and Harry, while trying, had read the same line of his History of Magic textbook six times and so far, not one word hadn't gone in through one ear to get out through the other. He had, long since, given up.

A rumble covered the common room as the passage opened. Most Slytherins, now used to it, gave only a glance to see if they knew whoever it was. Harry, hoping it was Ginny, did the same. He had hoped that there was some way to get her to talk to him, but that hope was apparently vain.

Three fourth year girls walked in, talking animatedly about the incoming Quidditch match. Unsurprisingly, they looked quite happy and spared him a glance upon seeing him, before bursting into gleeful giggling.

Harry sighed. They were not Ginny.

He sighed then gave a look at Blaise. She had also been helping him watching her during the length of the year, and this time was no exception. She gave him a somber nod.

"You should go talk to her." She said. "I think it's time to try to knock some sense into her brothers."

"You handle the twins." Draco, quite unexpectedly, said. "I'll talk to Weasley."

"Right. Leave me with the two most dangerous students of the school." Blaise scowled at him. "Why don't *you* handle them?"

Draco shrugged. "Because I have a plan to make Weasley stop being a git. And stop looking at me like that, Harry," he told his friend upon receiving a disbelieving glance.

"You would help Ginny? She *is* a Weasley, too." Harry asked.

"Shut up, I'm trying to forget that little fact, ok?" Draco growled. "She's a Slytherin; a housemate, and since both you and Blaise seem to put her under your wing, I can't really do much more than help you, can I?"

"You *could* pretend she doesn't exist..."

"With all the time Harry spends stalking her?" The boy said quite loudly, causing Harry to blush and splutter at the implications. "I'd have to be blind, deaf, mute, dumb, comatose and dead to the world to ignore her!"

"I am *not* stalking her!" Harry protested in a hiss.

"Besides," Draco continued, pointedly ignoring him, "she's got potential, even *if* the rest of her family is a bunch of Gryffindor-supporting penniless farmers."

"...are you sure you're fit to talk to Ron?" Blaise asked in a deadpan.

Draco smirked. "I have a plan, I said. It's foolproof, and considering Weasley *is*—"

"Thanks, we know." Harry interrupted with a sigh. He didn't need to hear more of his friend's anti-Weasley propaganda this morning.

The hallways, in contrast to the activity of the Slytherin common room, were somber and sad, as if the walls themselves were tired of having the Quidditch cup handed to Slytherin every year without fail. The students were silent, and those who spoke pointedly avoided the subject of the number one sport of the wizarding world.

Harry, Blaise and Draco easily found Hermione, studying up a storm in the library. Four books were open before her, and a well-organized parchment full of notes was growing as fast as the girl's quivering quill allowed it to.

"Oi, Granger!" Draco called quite loudly, causing many studiers to look up and glare at him angrily. As for his intended target, she literally jumped up a foot and landed on a heap, her quill falling noiselessly on top of the fresh ink of her notes. After making sure her heart was still beating normally – albeit a bit too fast – she shot a glare at the smug platinum-haired boy.

"What do you want?" She asked in a whisper.

"Do you know where Weasley is?"

"Ginny? How would I—"

"No, the other Weasley."

Hermione's eyes shone mischievously. "You'll have to be clearer... I mean, there is a lot of Weasleys in the school right now..."

"Ron." Harry clarified, knowing she had been baiting him into saying Ron's name civilly, which would probably have taken hours.

Disappointed at having her fun broken, Hermione scowled at Harry.

"He's in the common room. And I doubt he'd come out of there to talk to you."

Draco shrugged. "There goes my plan, then."

"That's it?" Blaise blinked. "Your plan is screwed already?"

He nodded. "Yup."

"...not much of a plan."

"You said it was foolproof." Harry noted.

Draco shrugged. "Granger's no fool."

"It's not exactly my fault that whatever you planned failed, you know." Hermione noted.

Disappointed, the three headed back to the common room, before Hermione had the idea of asking them how their studying was doing. They had no wish to see her reaction upon learning that it was flat lining and that the defibrillators didn't seem to work.

...not that they had tried them, either.

On their way back, however, Harry spotted Ginny some distance away, slowly edging along the hallway at an intersection. Seeing as Blaise and Draco were, once again, busy arguing, this time about the best way to process along to freak Lockhart out – monkey jokes seemed to have lost their effect, though it had taken nearly four months to do so – and wishing to speak to Ginny privately, Harry surreptitiously slowed to a stop, waited until they were far away enough and followed the red-head.

"Ginny!" He called as soon as she was in earshot.

She tensed up visibly and whirled around so fast her backpack was nearly ripped off her back. Harry noticed that, except for the apparent sadness that had followed her behind her mask of cheerfulness, she looked perfectly healthy. And that gloom disappeared quickly behind said façade.

"Harry?" She asked, smiling. Had Harry not been looking for signs of strain, he would have been fooled into thinking it was perfectly genuine. "Can I help you with something?"

"Yes, actually," Harry replied, looking about at the students. He had no wish to be eavesdropped on – his position on the whole mess was already suspicious, there was no need to add oil on the fire. "Follow me, I need to talk to you privately."

She nodded and did what he asked. Harry noted that she did not blush at the possible misunderstanding.

Yes, she was getting good at hiding her feelings, but she was trying too hard. It made her bluff obvious.

Finally finding shelter in a secluded, abandoned classroom – Hogwarts seemed to have many of those – that must have once been a Transfiguration class, if the imposing book entitled: *Transfiguration made easy in ten thousand pages*, dated 1462, lying on the teacher's desk was proof of anything, Harry closed the door and gave a look at Ginny, who was still not blushing. It was something rather unusual for her, he had to admit.

Harry pulled his mind back on the problem at hand, also known as the diary of Tom Marvolo Riddle.

"Gi...Di..." He gave a sigh and berated himself. Now he remembered! he hadn't prepared at all for this! The whole 'Getting to Ginny' had played wonderfully, but the 'Asking for Answers' did not.

Ginny merely cocked her head on confusion.

Reeling his thoughts in, he quickly improvised what he wanted to know. "Your diary, is it Tom Riddle's?"

He berated himself. If she lied and said no, which she could easily do, he had no way of continuing.

"Er... yes, why?" Ginny replied hesitantly.

Mentally cheering at his luck, Harry replied, "I had it for a while, but someone sneaked in our dorms and stole it."

Ginny suddenly looked angry. “What do you mean, you *had it for a while*?! That was *my diary*!”

“I don’t trust Riddle, Ginny. I was only—”

“You were sneaking in my things!” She snapped, tears brimming in her eyes. “Now because of you, someone in Slytherin has my diary!” Roughly, she shoved him out of the way – not that he resisted – and ran out of the classroom.

Alone, Harry groaned and sat down. “That did *not* go well.”

But no matter how badly it had gone, he now knew one thing, from her reaction. She wasn’t the thief. Perhaps it was time to ask his dark magic teacher about what those kind of books can do... after all, the *dark magic lexicon* had showed time and time again in the past the ability to move on its own and change its surroundings.

He walked out of the room, intent on heading to his dormitory. As he went, he did not notice he was being watched from the shadows. The figure frowned calculatingly for a few seconds, before walking away, mid-back red hair waving behind her...

**By Talking book, I assume you are implying of sentient enchanted objects like myself, are you not?**

Harry knew it was a risk to talk to the book during the daytime. At any moment, Crabbe, Goyle, Draco or maybe even Blaise could open the door, walk in and spot the book. As a safety measure, he held the book’s cover toward the entrance, but he did not want to tax the illusionist powers of the book. Who knew, perhaps it had a limit.

Yes, he wrote back, before launching himself in retelling the events he had seen in Tom Riddle’s diary, including the warmth on his forehead that he had began to associate with casting or being subjected to Dark magic.

**I see... yes, I do know Tom Marvolo Riddle. You can even say that the book you talked to is, in some way, my child.**

Harry was flummoxed. Child?

**Not in a literal sense, if course, since I am a book, and am ill equipped for such... tasks.** It quickly corrected, and Harry felt an odd sense of amusement in the words. **But I am the one who showed young Riddle how to 'create' his diary; how to infuse his memories and a part of himself inside a small, leather-bound book, hence why I call myself its parent in some way. Although the book itself has no life of its own except for the soul stored inside it, whereas I... well, enough about myself. Do you want to know something?**

So Tom had studied dark magic from the very same book he was holding in his hands, had he... That bore for further reflection. Mister Golden boy was apparently not everything he appeared to be. Quickly, he pulled his thoughts back to what he wanted to know.

*What can a talking book like that diary do? I've seen you float and go around, could it do the same?*

**Hardly**, it replied. **The book has what powers young Tom Riddle infused in it, and the magic he had decided to sacrifice to create it. It is unlikely that he decided to throw away all his magic and thus give the book the exact same powers he has.**

*What did your creator use to make you so strong?* Harry asked, unable to resist his curiosity.

There was no answer for a moment. Harry felt uneasy; perhaps he had offended it? To his relief, but not satisfying his curiosity, it did not reply, instead asking: **Do you have any other questions?**

It was a dismissal. Simply put, polite and direct. Harry couldn't think of anymore things to ask it, so he shook his head, perfectly knowing the book saw it, and closed it.

The Dark magic lexicon did not refer to that conversation afterwards. It was still just as polite, and just as cold and professional as ever before. Harry was a bit relieved that his ‘lessons’ were not hampered. He felt also uneasy to be relieved of that.

It was a bit of a vicious circle, actually.

On the subject of Ron, things were not quite going as nicely as he would have wished. No matter how hard he and his friends tried to corner Ron alone, it was no use. In classes, he seemed to never be far from the other Gryffindor boys now, and while Harry was certainly not afraid of Longbottom, Finnigan or Thomas, it *did* put a hamper on the whole principle of ‘Private conversation’ to have someone listening in. Outside of classes, he was in the Gryffindor common room; quite inaccessible to a group of Slytherins.

A whole week passed and no progress was made. In the meantime, news had continued to stream from the infirmary. The extent of his injuries, though heavily edited by the rumor mill, still unanimously declared him unfit for the match, and time had run out. The Slytherin common room was in a festive mood and already two sixth years were preparing to raid the kitchens and bring back a party banquet where, doubtlessly, Harry’s “Selfless and underhanded maneuver” would be honored time and time again.

It was understandable, to those who knew how much he liked attention, that the “guest of honor” had no wish to be present.

And so, Harry prowled around the crowded halls of students getting ready to watch a seriously mismatched Quidditch match – with only one team having a decent chance of winning, and neither a chance to get the cup – with Blaise and Draco who had decided to tag along. Students passing by them gave them, or at least, him, angry glares, or grateful smiles, upon recognizing him. It was not nearly as bad as what would have awaited him in the Slytherin common room, but it was bad anyway.

“...ied, eh? What will you do then?”

“She won’t! And you won’t either!”

"Ro—come back here! I'm not... Ron!!"

The shouting voices were familiar and cut neatly through the background noise of dozens of chatting voices. Harry recognized them on the spot and didn't need to see the tall, lanky red-head pass by them to know who they belonged to.

Hermione burst out of the crowd, apparently following her on-and-off friend. However, she had miscalculated her path and ended up running right into Draco and nearly falling over, saved from that fate by the aristocratic boy's quick reflexes.

"Er... thanks..." She mumbled, getting her balance back, pulling herself from his hands and moving a strand of bushy brown hair from her face. "Ro- Argh, he's gone!"

"I thought you said he was keeping his head in the sand?" Blaise said.

"He decided to come out today. He said he's got something to do. Probably wants to ask the Ravenclaws to hand over a victory by over four-hundred and fifty points. Honestly, there are other things than Quidditch in life..."

Yes, it was the logical thing to do. The only way for Gryffindor to actually have a fair chance at getting the cup was to end the game with more points than Slytherin, who were 440 points ahead of them. And the only chance for Ravenclaw to win today was to be 160 points ahead of Gryffindor when they caught the snitch, which would, at the same time, put them forty points over the Slytherins.

However, with the living Bludgers that were Fred and George Weasley and the impossibly fast and coordinated Bell, Spinnet and Johnson combo, it seemed unlikely that the demoralized Ravenclaw team would manage to do that. However, their battered pride wouldn't let Gryffindor reap an easy win from what Harry himself had sown, either. And Macdonald, the Gryffindor seeker, would be a prime target during the whole match – the balance hung all on him.

Odds were very good for a tight chaser-based match ending in Gryffindor's favor; the seeker was alone, the beaters would be busy either defending or taking him out, leaving the chasers to fight each other without help.

Ignoring his friends' outraged gasps at hearing Hermione dare insinuate that Life was more important than Quidditch, he spoke.

"He's deluding himself." Harry said with a shrug. "The Ravenclaws won't give up like that."

"I don't want to hear another word about Quidditch, get it?" Hermione snapped angrily and crossing her arms stubbornly, startling the three Slytherins into being silent. With the absence of conversation in their circle, outside words came to their ears:

"...still say our team should give up..."

"...no way, the Weasleys are too good, Macdonald won't fall..."

"...bet you Slytherin wins the cup..."

"...bludgers..."

"...Katie bellissimo..."

"...snitch..."

Hermione sighed in dejection. "Never mind."

Harry chuckled at her discomfiture, patting her shoulder calmly.

"Are you going to watch the match?"

She shrugged. "No, I've got to study... exams comin—"

"Yes you are, Hermione Granger." Blaise interrupted.

"I know I have to study—"

"I mean you are coming."

“Oh.” Hermione frowned. “It’s not like I need to go anyway... it’s going to be retold so many times that even *Neville* would be able to give a minute-by-minute retelling of everything.”

“I doubt that.” Draco drawled.

“You just don’t want to be with Ron, right?” Harry asked.

Hermione did not reply, but the hardening of her eyes and the subtle clenching of her jaws told Harry all he needed to know.

“Then you’re going to watch it with us.”

She gave him a dubious look. “Um, Harry, I’m a Gryffindor. You’re Slytherins. If I go and watch the match with you lot, I’m going to get lynched, if not by your housemates, then by mine.”

“Which is better; being stuck in the Gryffindor section with Weasley, or being with us in the Slyth’s?” Blaise asked.

“Being in the library with my books.” Hermione replied evenly.

“Except for that.” Blaise corrected.

“Being in the common room with my books.” Hermione said on the same tone.

“Something that doesn’t involve *books*.”

“Being in the common room with my notes.”

“I give up!!” Blaise gasped theatrically under the laughs of her friends.

“Hermione,” Harry said, taking a hold on her shoulder, “we’re not going to let you overwork yourself. Your average is over one hundred percent, you’re the smartest witch in our year, if not the school. One day of relaxation won’t hurt. It might even do you some good, you look tired.”

And she did. Her eyes had ugly bags under them. Not enough to be alarming, but enough to tell him that she needed rest. She *had* as far as he knew, spent the majority of her time her nose

stuck in her books and a hand on a quill for the past two weeks, and although that fact was not altogether unusual for the obsessively bookish girl, it did not make it a very healthy habit.

“But the Slytherins...”

“--will have to deal with me if they try something.” Blaise interrupted, taking out her wand with a quick motion of her wrist.

Hermione sighed in defeat. “Fine.”

They killed some time walking about and talking about whatever they could think of. Once or twice, Hermione had to be reminded of why she was not reading something or why she was not in her common room. Twice as many times, she had to be reminded that her scores were high enough to ensure that she would pass her year, with good enough grades even if she flunked her June exams à la Crabbe & Goyle.

The bell rang, announcing what would normally be the first class of the day. This was the signal for everyone in the school – it was time to head for the Quidditch pitch. Hermione made one last attempt to go away, but Blaise’s right grip on her shoulder stopped her.

“B-Blaise!!” She protested. “Let go, I have to—”

“—relax, take a break and watch your stupid housemates get their brains bashed through by flying iron balls? That’s what I thought.” Blaise finished her line for her, clearly indicating she would not bend. “You’ll like it!”

“The only reason why I care about Quidditch is because *they*,” she pointed at Draco and Harry, “are in one of the teams!”

“You mean you root for us?” Draco asked disbelievingly. Had she no house loyalties?

Hermione replied with a mischievous grin. “I said the two of you. I still want Gryffindor to win.”

Ah. Yes she does.

*“Yessss... Free...”*

Harry blinked and stopped walking as he heard the voice.  
“Nemesis?”

“Uh? What are you hissing about now?” Draco asked.

“I... heard something...” Harry said, looking at the floor around them. There were too many pairs of feet and legs to let him see anything clearly, though. He felt confident, however, that the six foot long snake would not pass silently in a hall full of people. No, he would have caused a commotion...

...maybe he had imagined it?

*“Kill... this time... tear apart...”*

Oh no, he most certainly had not.

“The voice!” Harry gasped.

“...voice?” The other three stared at him blankly.

Harry quickly explained the strange, disembodied voice he had heard on the site of the first attack.

“And you heard it again?” Blaise asked.

Harry nodded. “I just did!”

“I didn’t hear a thing, Harry.” Draco said.

“B...But it was there... and...”

“Could it be the monster?” Blaise said hesitantly, her left hand hovering over her hip-attached wand holster, her eyes staring wildly.

“Could be,” Draco said darkly, eyes darting around, his hand over his wand pocket. Harry clearly heard him grumble: “Freeing the monster just before a Quidditch match... no manners at all...”

"How come only you can h... hear... understand... wait... wait, hold on..." Hermione said, before her face scrunched up in thought, her hands motioning in the air and her lips moving in unsaid words. Suddenly, her eyes lit up in realization. "I... I think I might... it might be... but... I need to go to the library, go ahead without me!"

"Oh no you—Hermion—Arh!" Blaise called after her rapidly disappearing friend. "Goes off running while the monster's on the loose. Completely mental..." She turned to her two friends. "You two go to the pitch and get us two seats. We'll be right there."

And she ran off, barging her way through the crowd in a manner not unlike her mother's, inciting annoyed reactions and irritated comments.

Harry and Draco looked at each other and shrugged.

"You heard the lady." Harry said.

"Lady?" Draco queried, inciting a snort from the raven-haired boy.

Seats were easily found in the Slytherin section of the stands. In fact, they found some on the very front row, even with their relative lateness. Normally, those seats were taken within the first ten minutes after – or the half-hour before – the bell. Harry and Draco had reserved two other seats, as well, and when asked, they replied "For Blaise and a friend." Nobody asked twice. Harry wondered, though how the students around them, who were mostly older students – except for Pansy, who was sitting with Millicent two seats away – would react when Hermione arrived. Hopefully she would remember to hide her house badge and to remove her red and gold necktie.

Time passed and more students arrived, finding seats. Conversations passed everywhere around them, bets were made – most in favor of Harry's prediction of the match's results – yet there was no sign of Hermione and Blaise.

'Where are they?' He wondered. Hermione had looked like she had discovered something she thought was important, possibly more important than Quidditch – which was easy, since, in her opinion, doing a defense against the dark arts homework like writing a haiku for Professor Lockhart was more important.

That girl had no sense of priorities at all. The next thing she'd say that being expelled is worse than being dead.

"Harry?" A voice asked, interrupting his musings.

It was Emma. She and Xu were sitting behind them. Ginny, however, was nowhere to be seen.

At his wordless acknowledgement of their question, the adopted pure-blood asked: "Have you seen Ginny? We can't find her anywhere..."

"She like vanish." Xu agreed.

Harry blinked. Ginny was gone as well? Why? As far as he knew, she had no reason to miss the match – she had a healthy interest in Quidditch and would surely welcome the distraction.

"We haven't seen her either," Draco replied for him. "Maybe she's somewhere else in the stands..."

"What's McGonagall doing over there?" The four heard Pansy's rather high-pitched voice ask out.

Harry's attention went to the pitch, where, heading toward the center, was the stern transfiguration teacher, looking unusually flustered and holding a purple megaphone in her hand. The two teams, who had been getting ready to lift off, stared at her in surprise. Upon reaching the middle of the field, she lifted the megaphone to her mouth and said in an obviously magically enhanced voice,

"The match is cancelled!"

Cries of protests and jeers came from everywhere at once. Ignoring them and the teams' captains reactions – the Gryffindor

captain sounding especially vehement – the professor continued to speak.

“The students are to return to their common room and await further information. Hurry up, please!”

“What going on?” Xu asked, blinking. “What fer-der mean?”

Harry gave a puzzled look at Draco, who shrugged and grinned.

“We get the cup.”

Following the crowd of grumbling students who had wanted to see the match, as one-sided as it would have been, Harry wondered just what was going on here. Hermione and Blaise *still* hadn’t showed up, Ginny had suddenly disappeared, McGonagall cancelled the match while he *knew* she was an avid fan of Quidditch herself... hopefully most of these questions would be replied to when they got back to the common room... but, why...

A sudden, chilling thought came to his mind. Could it be...?

Why else would a match be cancelled? Why else would the students *all* have to return to the common room *now*? Why else—

“Mister Potter, Mister Malfoy,” A voice called, breaking his musings once again. This time, it was Professor Snape, who had singled them out among the crowd. “Please follow me.”

His voice was low, but true to form, both boys clearly heard it. With apologetic looks at the two younger girls, the Draco and Harry disengaged from the crowd and headed toward his standing form. As soon as they were close enough, he whirled around and started to walk quickly forward, his long black cape billowing, forcing the two children to jog after him.

“Sir? What’s going on?” Harry asked.

“There has been another attack.” Professor Snape said.

The boy nearly froze. His guess had, unfortunately, been right. But why would he call after him *and* Draco? It made no sense... it if only had been Harry, then he would have guessed that he still wasn't off the hook and that *someone* still believed he was the heir...

"It wasn't Harry, I was with him all day long," Draco jumped in to defend him, although he was starting to pant from the jog

"I am aware of that," Professor Snape replied, slowing down just a bit. "Rest assured, your innocence is not being questioned."

"Then why?"

Professor Snape did not reply, instead taking a quick right turn. For a second, Harry was able to see the teacher's usually stone cold eyes, looking at them with an unfamiliar emotion... what was it...

Harry recognized the hallway they were in, now. It was on the third floor. But there was nothing in there, except for the infirmary and...

...oh.

...OH.

"P...Professor, who was attacked?" Harry asked nervously,

Please, not who I think it is... not...

The professor did not reply. Harry felt irritation grow in his chest.

"Professor?" He asked again, a bit less of a question and more of a demand in his voice.

This time, the man sighed. "Potter, do not take that tone of voice with me..." His voice was weary and tired, as if all he wanted to do at the moment was to lie back in a comfortable chair with a full bottle of brandy and get himself drunk as quickly as he could.

They had reached the infirmary door by the time Snape continued. "Nevertheless, I believe you may have a proper reason to do so after this."

And he pushed the door open.

Harry had never liked the infirmary. It was either too cold or too hot, the bed sheets were itchy and the air smelled strongly of disinfectant. The food was bad, too, compared to Hogwarts' feasts.

"H...Harry?"

The trembling voice belonged to a shell-shocked Ron Weasley, sitting at the bedside of one Hermione Granger, who was frozen stiff on top of the white covers, an expression of cautious curiosity still etched on her face as she peered at something she must have held in her right hand, which was stretched ahead of her. A small, handheld blue-cased mirror was lying on her bedside table.

And on the bed beside her lay Blaise Zabini, who was in a flawless dueling position, her left hand holding nothing but air, her wand lying on the bedside table. Frozen still, like a statue.

Both were petrified. The heir had struck again, after months of inactivity.

Draco went at Blaise's side, his face cold and emotionless, hiding his pain. Ron's face was brimming with tears. Harry's was a mix of both.

"We'll get him." He hissed. "I swear that bastard will pay."

The youngest Weasley boy and the Malfoy heir nodded as one, neither looking at him.

"Understandable sentiments, Mister Potter," An old, wizened voice said from the doorway behind him as a warm, dry hand fell on his shoulder. Harry nearly jumped – he hadn't even noticed Dumbledore entering the room. "But you will understand if I disapprove of you taking justice into your own hands."

Harry whirled around to face the headmaster. For some reason, cold fury surged from his control, directed at the old man. *He* was powerful! *He* evidently knew *everything* that went on in the school! So *WHY* hadn't he stopped the heir before this happened?

"See if I care." He growled, ignoring the sudden heat on his bandanna-clad forehead.

Dumbledore did not reply, but his eyes lost their glimmer – how dare it be there anyway?! – and took on a worried air.

And as quickly as it had came, the anger vanished like the warmth under his bandanna, replaced by a feeling of guilt and cold fear that he had gone far enough to anger the old headmaster of the school.

"Er... sorry," He quickly apologized. "I... er..."

"You are on edge." Dumbledore replied for him in a calm voice. "Also an understandable feeling."

Harry nodded slowly. Now that he thought about it, his last train of thought was ridiculous – Dumbledore knew much of what was going on in the school, but if the heir was allowed to continue, it was only because he did not know who it was, or where the chamber was.

He had never felt quite as guilty... as ashamed of himself, as at that moment. How could he have gotten angry so quickly?

...why had his forehead burned?

What the hell was wrong with him?

~~~~~

Elmira Zabini, in number six, Privet drive, picked up a faded, brown leather coat so hurriedly that the hanger fell to the floor in a clatter, her wand ready to be drawn in a heartbeat from the holster tied on her right hip. Her watch flashed in bright crimson strobes with a single name:

Blaise.

Few seconds later, a detonation made few heads look up. Figuring that ruddy Dursley boy had once again decided to explode a firecracker, their owners quietly went about their business, not knowing of the most recent dilemma.

"At this rate, there'll be no Muggle-borns left at Hogwarts, and we all know what an awful loss that would be to the school"

Lucius Malfoy, Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, page 194

Chapter 20: The Chamber of Secrets (part I)

That bloody statue. She had never liked that statue. Made of gold and standing atop a fountain filled with crystal-clear water, it depicted five figures making a stand; a wizard, the tallest and proudest, shooting water from his wand, held high in the air; the unnaturally beautiful witch, standing behind the wizard, her wand just a bit lower than her compatriot; a goblin, looking quite ridiculous with the water shooting out of its pointed hat, looking up in an adoration that a genuine goblin would never have at the human pair; the centaur, shooting water from its bow while *also* looking up at the humans... And finally, a house elf, whose admiration went right up to veneration, although she had known one or two whose obedience had gone that far. Yet even those did not shoot water out of their ears in an almost laughable way.

There were so many symbols and significations to that statue that she couldn't list them all; most of which were old, bigoted and arrogant beliefs, such as the superiority of pure-blooded wizard kind, which unfortunately held the corrupt ministry like a pincer.

She had never liked the statue.

She had never liked the ministry, either. If she had any choice in the matter, she would have never walked in at all.

Unfortunately, going to Hogwarts legally required a mountain of paperwork and riffraff, most of which seemed to be quite useless, like that form that demanded her to describe the shape of her nose. Normally, she would have scoffed the rules, but due to her... peculiar situation, that was not a safe thing to do.

And so, here she was, sitting beside the charity sign at the foot of that bloody golden statue to honor the superiority complex that wizard kind seemed to suffer from so much, holding her sixth empty cup of coffee and looking at frequent, regular and increasingly irritated intervals. Anyone else would have been asked to wait in one of the many waiting lobbies, but her... The uniform-clad young Auror posted at the door she had came out of, who was giving her wary, antagonizing glances when he thought she wasn't looking told her all she needed to know.

It was a silent warning for her to keep in line. She snorted – that little kid didn't look like he had seen battle, himself. He was even younger than her; probably twenty-one, barely out of the training courses.

No. One of those new generation softies, by-the-book Aurors who went through training regimens regulated and decided by fools who were blinded by the arrogant, ignorant belief that this peace would be eternal, belief that seemed to have taken control of the magical world's ministry and populace, as well.

If she decided to go by force, he wouldn't be the one to stop her, even *if* she hadn't seen a true magical battle in the last... oh... decade or so? Fighting, after going through the nerve-wracking, intensive and demoralizing training she had pushed herself through, was like riding a bicycle.

"Mrs Zabini?" A timid voice finally asked.

The woman whirled around to face her interlocutor – a small, aged wizard with enormous glasses and frizzy grey hair, holding an armful of forms she recognized as most of those she had filled herself.

"Yes?" Elmira Zabini asked, growling inwardly. If she was asked to fill even *one* other form, she was going to flip...

"I'm afraid you did not fill form B-76-8 correctly, ma'am," The wizard said in a high-pitched, highly annoying, nasal tone. "Normal' is not a proper answer for the shape of your nostrils and..."

It was only intense self-discipline that allowed her to resist the sudden homicidal urge that took her over...

...barely.

She badly needed another coffee.

If one had the ability to see the same room at two different moments in time, one would have been shocked by the heavy contrast of moods that reigned over the Slytherin common room. Just a few hours had passed since the Quidditch game had been cancelled, and news of the attack, and the identities of their victims, had long since traveled everywhere. The reason why everyone was so shocked, though, was not only because there had been another attack...

Blaise Zabini, half-blood bearing the name of an Italian pure-blood family, known to everyone as one girl with a seriously volatile temper and one who would fancy cursing anyone who triggered the explosion, a second year student and close friend of Harry Potter...

...and a Slytherin. The very first Slytherin to have been attacked.

It seemed that this fact had made everyone in the house realize they were not safe from the heir's wrath. He *had*, after all, attacked Percy Weasley, who was a pure-blood guilty only of being a member of a Muggle-friendly clan. And, while they would not admit it, more than a few Slytherins were members of such families.

The tensions were such that they would only be cut by a laser beam. Discussions were held in hushed whispers and in small, tightly closed groups who became silent as soon as someone they did not know approached. The atmosphere of the room, which was normally something akin to a busy stock exchange room, now held the silence of a library and the stress of an operation room's lobby.

To resume everything for those who have skipped over the last few lines – make that paragraphs – a dropped pin would have caused half the room to jump on the rafters.

Including the furniture. One of the chairs had already scampered away in surprise from someone who had tried to sit on it.

Harry was one of the subjects whispered across the room. Sitting on the sofa near the fire, rolled in a blanket and holding a steaming cup of hot chocolate in his hands, he didn't seem to have gotten one bit of sleep. His hair was a mess, but that was not unusual, and his normally fiery green eyes burning with a glittering mischievousness were dull and lightless, staring at the transparent mist hovering above his cup.

The porcelain cup was scalding hot – the mere act of holding it made his palms feel like they were being burned in a fire. He didn't care. The steam slowly rose from the dark brown liquid, lazily floated for a mere second before disappearing out of existence. It had been changed ten minutes ago, yet Harry had yet to drink a sip. He had not drunk anything in the previous thirteen cups, either.

"You really are... Err... I mean... You were saying?"

Blaise... Blaise had been his very first contact with the Wizarding world, his escape rope from the hellhole that was the Dursleys'. If it hadn't been for her, he would have probably made the mistake of showing his admission letter to Uncle Vernon, and then... he would probably have never entered Hogwarts. She and her family had been the first to actually show kindness toward him, without demanding anything in return.

“So? It’s still a school, which means teachers, work, work, more work and... Homework...”

She had been—was—, and Harry felt fairly certain in this declaration, his very first friend. With Dudley constantly bullying anyone who *dared* do the unforgivable *sin* of showing kindness to him, it had certainly not been easy to find friends... no, Harry knew his childhood had been a lonely one, until she had arrived.

“I really wonder what it is though... who knows, maybe it’s one from of your fangirls.”

Her friendly banter and teasing had been a welcome addition to his life, a well-deserved change from the often cruel baiting from the kids back in Surrey. Blaise never seemed to be out of life and energy – at least, as long as school was not involved – and would, in an instant, jump to his defense, whether he asked for it or not.

...she was also the first person to do this for him, as far as he knew.

Yet even now, she laid in the infirmary, still as a rock, the stubborn expression of someone who would never give up fighting frozen still on her face, her limbs stuck in the dueling position she had showed them.

“Hermione, there is such a thing called control. You should try it sometime.”

“Oops.”

And Hermione... he knew the bookish muggle-born Gryffindor less than Blaise, but it was still a blow. The girl was essentially what held Ron to their group – quite honestly, Harry was certain that, if she had not been there, Ron would have simply branded Harry with the “evil” mark he seemed to have aimed at Draco and would have either ignored him or went out of his way to make his life difficult. More than it already was, anyway.

Yet even now, he could see her in his mind – cautiously peering at something, her right hand stretched ahead, holding nothing but air, an expression of curiosity he could easily recall

seeing in the past – during a potions lesson as she tried to understand the “why” of porcupine quills and armadillo bile; as she read the daily prophet, trying to understand and memorize just who held every important position in the ministry of magic...

As she stared directly at whoever had petrified her...

Idly, he rubbed at his forehead. It felt warm – the mere darkness of his thoughts enough to make him feel like he was getting ready to cast one of the spells-he-was-not-supposed-to-know. He found himself able to recall every single detail of Blaise and Hermione’s frozen bodies, down to the way the bookworm’s bushy, puffy hair had been oddly tilted upwards – or forwards, depending on the point of view – as if the girl had just had enough time to recoil in horror before... whatever happened, happened.

Harry was still mulling over dark, circular thoughts when Draco walked down from the stairs, his white-blond hair slicked back in his usual manner, yet, to the practiced eye, obviously more sloppily than he would have allowed himself to otherwise.

Draco was seen immediately. Whispers dropped faster than a heavyweight from a cliff, though the number of diversified, but none of them pleasant, looks rose like the same heavyweight launched from a catapult. He did not care, nor did he give them more than a passing glance.

The sound of his shoe-clad feet touching the ground seemed louder than gunshots as he approached his friend, people moving out of his way without requiring any prompting. If, before, they had been respected, if only for their names – being angry at Harry Potter was one thing, but being mad at a Malfoy and attracting that family’s anger was like being mad in the nutty sense – now, they were given plenty of space because people were quite unsure of how to react.

Given one or two days of this, though, and they would go back to normal.

“Harry?”

The black-haired boy did not reply to his query and continued to stare blankly in the fading mist of is cooling chocolate in the cup held by his burned-red hands. He didn't seem to notice anything.

"Harry," he called again, this time shaking the other boy by the shoulder. "Oi, wake up... Harry!"

That seemed to snap him out of his thoughts, although his startled reaction made him drop the cup of steaming-hot chocolate, which fell with a hollow thud on the green and silver, fireproof-charmed carpet laying in front of the roaring flames in the grate.

"Uh?" The wordless query was empty and numb, unreadable simply by its lack of content.

"Weasley said he'd meet us in the infirmary. We've got ten minutes."

Harry frowned and looked down at the blot of chocolate near his feet, rapidly spreading across the easily staining material of the green and silver rug. After few seconds of reflection, the boy got up and nodded.

"Let's go, then."

It gave him something to do, at least.

Elmira Zabini had been angry before in her life. She had also been furious. Now, though, she was starting to believe that the annoying bureaucrat was going to put her on the setting "enraged" if he asked her to correct just *one more* form...

...she had thought that for the last three, as well.

But then, she hadn't been ready to tear the chair apart and knock it on his head back then.

So far, her self-restraint had been admirable.

The chair she was sitting in was crispy, uncomfortable and in dire need for a good cushioning charm. It felt like she had broken a window and had taken a fancy into sitting in the shards, only without the cutting and major ouchies. The office was plain, filled to the brim with forms of all kinds, posters on regulations and enough rulebooks to put Filch to shame. She had yet to spot the chains, though. The only things that remotely decorated the office, unless one was into the whole... papery ornament thing, were two perfectly mundane metal torch holders, which were now empty, since artificial/natural sunlight was seeping through a tiny hole in the roof, which fell directly on the desk, making reading and writing forms possible.

Swell.

There was a single door in the back wall through which even *more* forms were accessible. It seemed the hundred or so in the room were those for everyday usage; those she *needed* that *badly* were somewhere in the back.

I would like to take this moment to apologize for breaking sarcasm-o-meters of readers everywhere. Even those of who are not reading these words.

And that young auror, standing by the door, was laughing at her. Oh, not directly, but she could hear the small clinking of the dragon scales in his mail, and his mouth was suspiciously blocked by his hand. No doubt he knew her by reputation and thought she was now harmless, just because she had lost her position.

She felt dearly tempted to show him the error in his ways.

“Now see here, you’re supposed to tell us the reason the way you want to head to Scotland in A-17-B1’s question 11.”

“I wrote ‘Rescuing my daughter from danger’.” She replied stonily, her fist clenching. A single flick of her wand... just one...

“Yes, but you need to tell us exactly what—”

“I don’t know what it is, that’s why I’m going there...” She growled, repeating herself for the hundredth time. She was

mentally thinking of what curse would fit best with those huge, glasses that could easily have been cut-off bottle bottoms.

"Ah, yes... just a second, I'm going to have to get form F-02-18-C4, for demand of information... and the authorization 18-072-D6 to get your answers... and 01-05-E for the reason of the demand..."

And he wandered off into the backroom, still muttering to himself about forms and other things that were starting to give her an incredible headache.

Normally, she would have been impressed at the memory of the bureaucrat at remembering every number of all those forms. Now, however, she was in a hurry. A hurry mistimed by all this idiotic administration by a few hours – who knew what trouble Blaise was putting herself through right now? And if she was anything like her mother, Elmira absolutely *had* to hurry! To just charge in would be reckless...

...but it wasn't like she could just barge in and wreck havoc...

...right?

The idea was starting to feel really appealing.

The old man came back from the back with twice as many forms as she had filled.

...right.

Havoc it is, then.

A pair of glasses turned into two dark whiskey bottles. The weight sent the old man sprawling, where his forms spread across the floor.

The impetuous Auror was shown the error in his ways.

He would be found an hour later hanging from the lamp by the bottom of his messed up uniform, upside-down, along with the frantic bureaucrat trying to put his precious forms back in order.

And Elmira left the room, intensely satisfied and intent on seeking her answers, even if she had to break a hundred laws for that.

Most of them were useless, anyway.

Harry had never liked the infirmary. Perhaps it was the fact that every time he walked in here, there seemed to have some problem involving pain, perhaps poison or even a class accident involving asparaguses in his ears after a messed up jinx in charms – how Crabbe had foiled the spell this badly was still a mystery – or perhaps it was the pure white, boring and sterilized atmosphere that set him on edge...

Whatever it was, he did not like the room, nor what was in it. Madam Pomfrey was kind enough, except when people wanted to get out or didn't want to be fussed over.

The people petrified on the tables, though, were a different story.

Ron was already there, sitting at Hermione's side. His hair was a mess and he was still dressed in night robes, apparently not having taken time to dress up or to try to make himself presentable before going to see his friend. Madam Pomfrey was giving him glances every now and then, ticking her tongue in disapproval. Harry spotted a glass of water at Hermione's bedside, which was probably intended to him.

"Hey Weasley," Draco said, sitting on a chair – some distance away from the red-head. "Anything?"

Ron shook his head and turned to them. "Nothing on Zabini, either." He sighed. "They're just... frozen stiff. It's scary."

Harry nodded. The images in his head were one thing; it took him a few seconds to convince himself that he wasn't simply imagining seeing his friends like this.

Ron sighed. "Hermione... she and I argued just yesterday... she wanted me to apologize. Kept pestering me all year about it... asked me what I'd do if Ginny got petrified... or if *she*'d be petrified..."

"Having second thoughts about 'perfect git' Weasley's idea of 'caring for family'?" Draco drawled, although Harry could detect a victorious tone in it. Pity it had to come to such a price, though.

Ron nodded in agreement and seemed to find his feet exceedingly interesting for a second, before he gave the blonde a 'cocked-eyebrow' look. "And, what would *you* know about family care?"

Draco glared at him and opened his mouth, but Harry lifted his hand and went between them.

With a loud, heartfelt sigh that made him feel slightly better, but not that much, Harry sat down on the chair wordlessly assigned to him in the space separating the two other boys and preventing tempers to flare... too much, that is.

There was silence once again, interrupted only when Madam Pomfrey dropped a small drop of water-like liquid in a bubbling cauldron, causing a snappish, flashy explosion that, from the look of the matron's face, was perfectly normal.

"She said she had an idea about what was happening," Harry said after a few moments.

Ron chuckled. "That's Hermione. Smartest witch ever, I swear... pity she won't be able to tell us... yet."

The final word was added with forceful certitude, as if to remind himself that she would, eventually, move again, once Professor Snape had finished with the Mandrake Restorative Draught.

Draco frowned. “She’s usually more organized than that, though... if she found something, she’d have brought back some proof of what she’s saying.”

Ron stared blankly at Draco. “I thought you didn’t care about her?”

“I don’t,” Draco replied factually with a shrug, “but then, I don’t care about much, so...”

“Pull the ‘cool, cold guy’ act to everyone else, Draco...” Harry mumbled, thinking over what the now outraged boy had said.

“Oi! It’s not an act—”

“Mister Malfoy, be silent!” Madam Pomfrey called from where she was tending after some second year Hufflepuff with an imposing acne problem.

“Sorry!” Draco called back loudly, before snickering.

Harry, however, wasn’t listening. He had seen something – a little thing tightly clenched in Hermione’s left fist... it looked a bit like a page of old parchment...

It also felt like it, he decided when he tried to pull it out of the girl’s fist. However, the girl simply would not let go.

“Draco, Ron, I found something... help me out!”

After quite some time pulling and tugging at the paper – “I’d bet Hermione would have a spell handy,” Ron mused – they finally succeeded at taking it out, although it was fairly damaged in the end.

If madam Pince had seen the page, she would have thrown a fit. Ruffled, apparently torn out of a book, the page was evidently near the end of its life, just about ready to be thrown in the trash. However, what was written on it was what interested Harry. It seemed to be something taken from an old magical beast manual and held the twisting and twitching image of a snake whose eyes were blocked by a blindfold and was furiously trying to remove it.

"Of the many fearsome beasts and monsters that roam our land, there is none more curious or more deadly than the Basilisk, known also as the King of Serpents. This snake, which may reach gigantic size, and live many hundreds of years, is born from a chicken's egg, hatched beneath a toad. Its methods of killing are most wondrous, for aside from its deadly and venomous fangs, the Basilisk has a murderous stare, and all who are fixed with the beam of its eye shall suffer instant death. Spiders flee before the Basilisk, for it is their mortal enemy, and the Basilisk flees only from the crowing of the rooster, which is fatal to it."

There was a stunned silence as the three boys processed what Harry had just read. It fit. It all fit. Like a giant jigsaw puzzle, the pieces went perfectly in place, fitting snugly, simply thanks to a few words on a page.

"Two of Hagrid's roosters got killed..." Harry mumbled.

"The voice only you could hear... you're a parselmouth, it's a snake..." Draco whispered, awed, while picking up the glass of water absentmindedly.

Ron frowned. "It can kill with a look... but... nobody died, it doesn't say that it petrifies anywhere—"

"Except if the power of the gaze is dulled somehow," Harry said. "I guess that if someone looks at it indirectly, there are still side-effects... Petrification, for one."

"But what..." Draco mumbled, sipping at the water, before stopping abruptly. "Water... there was water on the floor when Norris was petrified."

"Weasley – your brother, I mean – wears glasses." Harry noted, starting to smile.

"Creevey had his camera..." Ron supposed, looking at the melted tool sitting at the Gryffindor boy's bed table. "He must have been looking through the lens..."

"Flitch-Fletchley, though? There was nothing..." Draco stopped himself short. "The Bloody Baron!"

"Exactly!" Harry exclaimed, getting excited. The other two were, as well. It was plainly obvious. "And a ghost can't die again, so the baron was safe."

"Relatively." Draco pointed out while looking at the floating dark mass of smoke.

"It figures Hermione's the one who figured it out..." Ron said, giving the girl a wistful smile. "She must have looked around the corner with that mirror and..."

Harry nodded as the taller boy fell silent. "But... it says here the Basilisk can reach gigantic size..." He pointed at the specie's specific specs. "There's no way a huge snake like that could go around and not be spotted, even *with* help from the heir..."

"There's something written, there..." Draco said, pointing at a single word, which had almost been torn off the paper in their attempts to take the page. "Pipes'."

"Of course!" Harry slapped his forehead. "The voice came from the walls; that snake's been going about the castle by crawling in the pipes! She even figured that out... Ron, remind me to tell her she's a ruddy genius."

"Right after I will." Ron replied, grinning.

"The hallway close to the entry hall... the Ravenclaw common room's entrance... that passage on the third floor... the hallway in front of the library..." Draco listed, counting off his fingers. "That thing *has* to have access to the entire school. And if the only way for it to go around is by using pipes, then that means it's hiding somewhere with lots of them... Preferably to somewhere that has access to the entire castle."

"The boiler room?" Harry suggested.

The two boys stared at him blankly.

"The what?" Ron asked.

"Never mind." Harry sighed. It figured wizards didn't use those.

"A bathroom!" Draco said, clicking his fingers and smirking victoriously.

"Right," Ron said sarcastically, "like I wouldn't notice a thirty ruddy feet long snake hiding in the toilet."

Draco opened his mouth.

Harry quickly spoke: "Maybe not in the toilet, but there has to be plenty of space in the pipes under the room..." he defended, while giving a pointed glare at the disappointed blonde.

"I still say he wouldn't..." Draco mumbled and grumbled under his breath.

"So, to find the snake, follow the smell?" Ron supposed, not hearing the blonde.

"Besides," Harry continued, ignoring the red-head, "the victim who died fifty years ago was killed in a bathroom..."

"Eh?" Ron blinked.

"Where did you learn that?" Draco asked.

Realizing his slipup, Harry quickly thought of a way out. "Would you believe me if I told you a snake told me?"

...ok, so it was lame and unbelievable, but heck... and besides, Tom was being sneaky, so, a snake he was.

The other two boys' dubious looks told him all he needed to know on the credibility of his story, not that he didn't already know.

"Er... right. Anyway... I think that's a good lead."

"Hmm," Ron agreed, giving him one final distrusting glance before nodding. "Maybe we could ask someone if they know where she died?"

"Professor Snape." Harry immediately said.

"Professor McGonagall is older." Ron retorted.

"And McGonagall is a sucker for rules. If we tell her, she'll lock us up in our common rooms and won't let us out until September." Draco reminded the red-head in a lazy drawl. "And professor Snape is too young for that... I'm thinking about... *Binns*."

"Binns?" Harry blinked. He hadn't thought of the ghost who taught them history at all.

"Sure," Draco continued, grinning superiorly at having thought of it, "Binns could probably state you the year and day of the invention of the wheel, and the hair color of the inventor. If he can't tell us in which bathroom that girl... die..d..." His voice trailed off as he stared at nothing.

"Oi, Malfoy, what's up?" Ron asked.

"Harry, ghosts are dead, right?"

"Hmm?" Harry agreed in a puzzled way. "And?"

"What if the girl was *still* in that bathroom?"

The black-haired boy blinked in confusion, before gasping in realization. There was only one girl ghost he knew, and she just *happened* to haunt a bathroom, awfully close to the first attack's site, too. "You think..."

"It's worth a shot." Draco replied with a shrug.

"What in the name of Merlin are you two talking about?!" Ron asked, looking at each boy in turn.

"Er... Mrs Zabini... we... er..."

How those guys had managed to land on the board of Hogwarts school's governors, she had no idea. Eleven people sat

before her, around a rectangular table with no chair on either short end. Most of them were old men, balding, tired and probably easily scared. Only one of the chairs was empty, and Elmira was quite glad for that; she knew it belonged to that blonde, arrogant, dark-lord-butt-kissing “Oh, sorry, I was under Imperio when I joined him of my free will, here’s some money to keep you quiet” arsehole that went by the name of Lucius Malfoy.

Yet, for a second, she wished he was there – at least, in that case, she would have had *some* answer, not just incoherent blabbering and nervous mutters. Maybe she should have hidden her wand? They *did* constantly give nervous looks at it...

A dark red spark shot out of the tip.

“There’s studentpetrifiedalloverschool!” The closest governor shrieked as the spark landed an inch in front of his left hand, which seemed to vanish at the speed it was hidden.

“What was that?” Mrs Zabini wanted to blink in confusion, but held herself to looking menacing and furious – not that it was all that hard. She knew that, to them, she was a violent, dangerous maniac. Perhaps it wasn’t safe – or fair – to use their image of her against them, but hey, it worked.

“There... er... have been small problems... involving students being petrified since the start of the year--”

The last few words were told on a higher pitch and faster rate than the rest, but Mrs Zabini clearly understood them. Her sense of alarm grew. Petrification? This was high-level dark magic, not just anyone could do that.

“And what have you done to correct this?” She pushed on a low and melodious tone that promised pain if there were no straight answers.

“Er... well... see... it’s a complex problem that needs a complex solution and—”

Not a straight answer. Another spark.

"We-ordered-the-last-culprit-to-Azkaban-and-kicked-Dumbledore-out-please-don't-hurt-me!!"

"*KICKED DUMBLEDORE OUT?!*" Mrs Zabini shrieked, causing two governors to topple from their chairs in alarm. "How is *that* supposed to solve *anything*!?"

"Er... well, see... it's... er..."

"Yes?"

A flick of her wand caused more sparks, one of which delicately floated by the governor's nose, trailing a distinct smell of burnt hair.

"It-was-actually-Mister-Malfoy's-idea!" The old man gasped as one exceptionally long word.

"Right." Mrs Zabini growled, now openly sneering in disgust at them. She could imagine it just well – blackmailed them, threatened their families or their wallet... she was well aware of Lucius Malfoy's methods, and she wished it was only by reputation.

She dearly wanted to exact a little bit of will-strengthening punishment – if cursing to the point where they would have wished they lived on a hellmouth could be called that – but now that she knew what was going on – and exactly how *badly* things were going – she knew she had to hurry back to Hogwarts.

It was much to the council's relief that she left. The blabberer soon followed, seeking a new – and clean – pair of underwear.

The bathroom was barely more welcoming than the last time. It was still as empty and lifeless, deathly quiet and stank of stagnate water that made Draco's nose scrunch up in disgust. However, this time, the only water on the floor formed a few

puddles around the cubicles, over which the ghostly girl was looking down at them from.

Only he and Draco were in the room. After being explained their idea, the Ron had decided he had better things to do... like find Ginny and *finally* apologize, as per Hermione's wishes. Harry felt very much glad he was *finally* learning to push his pride aside.

"How did you die?"

Perhaps asking the question straight ahead like Harry had just done wasn't such a good idea – he didn't know the first thing about the ghost, after all, and, perhaps, he was stepping on a touchy subject.

To his surprise and relief, however, the girl's lips twisted into a pleased smile and her body floated down to his level.

"Oh, it was horrible," She replied on a merry tone of voice quite unfitting for the nature of the story. "It happened right here, in the cubicle behind me... I remember it so well."

Harry heard Draco mumble something about the ghost having weird favorite memories.

"I'd hidden because Olive Hornby was teasing me about my glasses. The door was locked, and I was crying, and then I heard somebody come in. They said something funny. A different language, I think it must have been. Anyway, what really got me was that it was a boy speaking. So I unlocked the door, to tell him to go and use his own toilet, and then --- I died."

"How?" Harry asked.

"Saw herself in the mirror." Draco whispered. Harry almost snorted.

"No idea." said Myrtle, in hushed tones. "I just remember seeing a pair of big yellow eyes. My whole body sort of seized up, and then I was floating away ..." she looked dreamily at Harry. "And then I came back again. I was determined to haunt Olive

Hornby, you see. Oh, she was sorry she'd ever laughed at my glasses."

"Where exactly did you see the eyes?" Harry asked, feeling a pang of trepidation. It fit exactly with what Hermione had found.

"Somewhere over there," Myrtle said, waving lazily at the sinks.

Harry nodded his thanks and went to the sinks. The faucet holes were too small for a Basilisk to pass through, and the taps were even more so. There was no possible way that the snake could have come from there.

'Maybe one of them can grow bigger?' He supposed. Once again, at Hogwarts, anything was possible.

As he and his friend checked them over, they couldn't find anything strange or unusual about them. They were just plain, normal taps, and they didn't even respond to wand-touches, which was how most magical instruments were activated.

The sinks were normal as well, if a bit dirty from constant waterlogging and disuse. However, Harry noticed that one of them was much drier than the others... desert-dry, actually, which was very odd, in his opinion.

"That tap has never worked." Myrtle told him as he looked at the inactive source of water.

And he found it.

There, etched on the metal surface of the tap, was a single, twisty snake.

'The heir is supposed to be a parselmouth... then...'

"Open." He hissed.

"Eh?" Draco asked from the other side. "Open what?"

‘I spoke in English...’ He cursed, before concentrating on the snake. For an instant, he could imagine it twisting, writhing on the tap and slowly turning its eyes toward him...

“Open.”

This time, there was an immediate movement. The tap quickly slid inside the side of the sink as the faucet lowered into the ground with a thunderous rumbling sound, revealing a passage easily wide enough for a human and much more for a twenty feet long snake.

“Whoa... I found it!” Harry called, grinning.

“I noticed that...” Draco drawled with a wince and a pinky finger in his ear, “and I think that Hagrid might have, too.”

“Now what do we do?”

“We should tell Professor Snape where it is,” Draco suggested, “so he can do something-”

“No, not Professor Snape, Dumbledore. There’s a Basilisk down there,” Harry reminded him, “and it can kill you with just one look. If anyone can take it out, it’s Dumbledore. Come on...” He turned to the tap, muttered a quick “Close,” and turned toward his friend again as the sink complied and rumbled back into position. “We’d better hurry.”

“Damnit—Ruddy Mud!”

Elmira Zabini’s day was not going as she had planned at all. Instead of lounging in her favorite sofa while reading the newest edition of *Laughs for Lunatics*, she had been forced to head to the ministry, which was her second most hated place, just after the dentists’. Instead of indulging herself to a warm cup of hot chocolate – extra sugar, of course – she was thirsty and had to

stand seeing people drinking warm Butterbeer in the *Three Broomsticks*. She was tired, not having even closed her eyes at all during the night – no matter how much the damned bureaucrat made it tempting – her legs were sore from walking all over the place and standing for hours on end...

...and she had Apparated directly on top of a knee-deep puddle of wet, sticky, disgusting *mud*.

Thankfully, she hadn't decided to wear pale clothes, that day. That did nothing to make her look any less ridiculous as she painfully pulled her legs out of the bog. The *sole* square meter of mud in the village, and she *had* to land in it.

Then again, she had always been cursed with horrible luck with that particular spell.

Back to matter at hands, Elmira quickly cleaned herself with a charm – though her jeans stayed stained, damned domestic charms – and walked toward the Hogwarts gate in a jogging pace.

'Hold on, Blaise.' She thought resolutely, ignoring the looks she was receiving from the startled populace. 'Mommy is coming.'

'And woe betide anyone who *dared* hurt you.'

Somewhere in the magnificent castle, the heir of Slytherin shuddered inexplicably.

"We're really in trouble, now. Without Dumbledore, they might as well close the school tonight. If he goes, there's going to be an attack every day."

Ron Weasley, Harry Potter et la Chambre des Secrets, page 278

Chapter 21: The Chamber of Secrets (part II)

"How do you know where Dumbledore's office is anyway?"

Harry ignored the awkward question Draco had asked as they ran through the deserted halls of the castle. It wasn't the first, nor would it be the last. His secret conversation with Tom had been quite enlightening, but unfortunately it wasn't exactly like he had shared it with his friends – the last thing he wanted was for one of them to ask him how he knew the way to talk to Tom.

Hidden under his invisibility cloak, which he had pulled out of his book bag just in case they crossed Filch or someone else, the two boys had easily reached the second floor and Harry was now guiding them toward where he knew that, fifty years ago, the headmaster's office was.

He was dearly hoping Dumbledore had not decided to relocate.

To his relief, the gargoyle was still there, and he knew the passage was hidden behind it. A new problem suddenly came up, however.

"Er... what's the password?" Draco asked after a few seconds.

Harry did not answer again, and this time because he was asking himself the exact same thing.

'Bugger.'

Rubeus Hagrid let out a satisfied sigh as he sat down on a small, wooden chair that creaked in protest under his imposing, bulky but not fat weight. His dog, Fang, lazily lowered his head down onto his cushion-made bed, his four paws resting in a satisfied spread-eagle.

Spiders seemed to be running away from the castle everywhere he looked, startling other animals in the forest. He had found a unicorn foal all alone and had spent most of the morning going about the forbidden forest, trying to find its mother. Fortunately, the foal had been cooperative and the mother thankful, though still wary, but that couldn't be helped.

With a content sigh, he removed his socks, large enough to be someone's cap, and put his enormous feet into a large basin of warm water. Finally able to relax, he mulled over the most recent problem. A fourth rooster had been killed; it seemed that, every time he had a new one, it didn't survive the week. Yet the hens were left untouched. That meant it wasn't a fox, or a blood-sucking bugbear. Maybe it was someone's idea of a joke – Hagrid knew he was the butt-end of many, but he didn't care... much – but he doubted someone would waste their times to prank him like that with the monster on the loose.

Maybe it was the monster?

Baah. Petrifying students and strangling roosters was something else entirely. There could be no connection whatsoever.

Oh well, there was no use thinking about that – the school year was almost over, and if the rooster-killings continued during the summer, then he knew it wasn't some prank. For now, he much preferred resting his tired feet while reading the latest Daily Prophet.

Unfortunately for him, his day wasn't over.

Three forceful knocks disturbed the silence and peace of his warm and homey hut. Miffed and wondering who it could be, Hagrid let his newspaper aside, pushed the basin away, pulled on his socks and opened the door...

And found himself standing at the wandpoint of three Aurors, recognizable by their blue combat uniform.

"Rubeus Hagrid," The lead Auror, a young-and-coming brown haired man with a nose that seemed to have been cut out of someone who's face was twice as big as his, began. "By order of the ministry of magic and in a preventive measure, I hereby order you to give yourself up to justice."

"...wha' the hell are yeh talkin' abou'?!" Hagrid asked. "Preven'ive measure?!"

The Auror just shrugged. "It's my orders, sir. Now, will you follow us, or do we have to force you? Either way, you don't really have a choice."

"Dun' tell me those idiots still think *I'M* the one who's petrifyin' people?!"

"Not my business to know." The Auror said. "All I have to do is take you off and escort you to Azkaban—"

"...Azkaban?!" Hagrid growled. "The minis'ry'd send people 'n Azkaban jus' cuz they *think* I migh' be releasin' the mons'er on studen's?!"

"I take it that means you won't go peacefully." The Auror said in an almost tired voice.

Hagrid's hand closed on his crossbow, sitting by the door.

"Damn righ'!"

"Very well." Undaunted by the exceptionally large weapon pointed at him, the Auror turned to his colleagues. "Take him away."

"Oh, I think not, no..." A voice called from behind them.

Elmira Zabini, boots and jeans brown with dried mud, her hair a bit ruffled, but still grinning ferally, stood steadfastly behind them, her brown coat waving in the wind, her wand pulled out and tapping playfully against her forearm.

"Who are you, lady?" The leading Auror growled. "This is ministry business—"

"Me?" Mrs Zabini interrupted as if he hadn't been speaking. "I'm just your neighborhood Ex-Auror, Zabini..."

Her grin turned ferocious and her wand pointed at the suddenly nervous men.

"And Hagrid is my friend, so back off or things might get a tad painful."

"Er... *Imperatum?* *Vici?* Great...er...*umi*... what's the Latin word for great anyway?"

Draco and Harry were still by the gargoyle, trying to guess the password to Dumbledore's office, but to no avail; it just wasn't moving. Maybe it wasn't even a password passage, maybe one had to be convoked to be allowed passage... maybe Dumbledore had moved, and the gargoyle simply wasn't used anymore...

But for now, since they were unable to answer any of these suppositions, they were simply trying to guess what password Dumbledore could have put up there.

Considering how sane the man was supposed to be, it would have taken nothing short of a miracle to make a lucky guess.

“Er... *Lumos, Lunis, Loony...*”

“Forget it, Draco. We’d better ask Professor Snape.” Harry said. “He’ll get Dumbledore... did you hear that?”

Draco blinked and confusion and stopped trying to guess. In the sudden silence, they could clearly hear a regular, metal-on-stone clanking noise and a pair of voices that were not familiar to Harry... no, wait... he had heard one of them before...

“I’m still not convinced that doing this will solve anything...”

“Dumbledore’s position in the school is entirely up to the board of governors, minister.” A smooth, silky voice replied to the other one, the voice he was able to recognize.

The two boys shared a look that spoke volumes and, with a common nod, slipped under the cloak to hide – quite uselessly, considering they couldn’t be seen – behind a set of armor.

“But... The attacks...”

The two men walked into view. One of them was a chubby little man wearing an aqua pinstriped cloak, a light blue business suit and a small, lime-green bowler hat. The other, holding a snake-headed cane in his left hand and thus producing a frankly irritating noise with every step, had long, wavy, platinum hair, clear, icy cold grey eyes and was wearing a rich-looking black silk robe ensemble. His every movement spoke volumes of aristocracy and wealth.

It was, indeed, Lucius Malfoy. Harry felt Draco tense up at his side.

"It is not like he has managed to stop them, has he?" Mr Malfoy replied coldly as they stopped in front of the gargoyle. "Now what was the password again..."

"I believe it was *Caramilk*." The man, whom Malfoy had referred to as 'Minister', said, an instant before the statue sprang aside to reveal a dimly passage.

Malfoy's upper lip rose in disgust. "A Muggle sweet. How... quaint."

The tone of his voice clearly said that he found it *anything* but quaint. Being in Slytherin, Harry had known that many families disliked Muggles or Muggle-borns simply because of their ancestry – Draco himself still tended to look down on Muggle-borns and half-bloods, with Harry, Blaise and Hermione as only exceptions – Harry being famous, Hermione being just too brilliant to be looked down on and Blaise being just too damned dangerous to insult.

However, Harry felt that, to Malfoy, Muggles were little more than vermin, if they even could be considered on the same level.

The two men walked forward, disappearing from their view, and the gargoyle closed behind them, concealing the opening completely. As the rhythmic sound of Mr Malfoy's cane hitting the stone tiles faded away, Harry felt his friend relax and heard him release a long, shuddering breath.

"At least now we know the password." Harry said. "Let's go in."

"You go alone." Draco said with a shake of his head. "If father learns I'm your friend, being skinned alive will be the least of my worries."

Harry nodded and pulled his cloak off the blonde to keep it to himself. "Fine. You go back to the chamber. The school year is almost over, and I don't trust the heir to stay quiet today. If he really wanted to hit hard, he'd hit now, while the minister is in the school." Draco nodded in agreement, his eyes staring at where he knew Harry was without really seeing him.

"By the way," Harry continued, stopping in front of the gargoyle, "one day you're going to have to tell my why your dad hates me so much."

Draco's lips twisted in an unreadable smile.

"Maybe one day." He replied.

And he turned around, heading back to the bathroom.

"Sherbet lemon."

No wonder they hadn't guessed it. A muggle sweet. It made an odd kind of sense, though, but then again, Dumbledore could hardly be called normal.

Harry tried to keep his mind on track as he climbed up the staircase to Dumbledore's office, following his friend's father and the 'minister'.

"Stupefy! Stupefy!"

Elmira Zabini almost felt like yawning as she fought her first duel in years, well, technically, it could hardly be called a duel. A duel implicated that both sides fought at the best of their abilities and tried, in every possible way, to take the advantage. It meant that *both* sides actually stood a chance of winning.

But so far, the two Aurors left, which included the lead Auror – the third one had looked older, had been classed as the higher threat in her mind and had thus been knocked out early – had yet to use any originality. Their spells varied between full-body binds and stunners... actually, there seemed to be quite the overuse of the latter.

"Stupefy, Stupefy!"

It appeared old Moody's unpredictability lessons were no longer taught to the newest generation of Aurors. Sad, really...

Easily ducking away from both curses, one of which would have missed her by a full foot even if she had not moved, the woman allowed herself a sigh. Her playtime was over; her skills hadn't really rusted all that much.

"*Expulsio*," she almost lazily said, waving her wand at the other subordinate, who went flying against a well-placed tree, knocking his head against a high branch and belly flopping down into the ground spectacularly. It had been a long time since she had used that spell, but apparently she hadn't lost her tou--

"*Expelliarmus!*" The lead Auror snapped triumphantly, shooting at her almost at point blank.

Reflexively, she dug her heels into the ground and was thus prevented from flying off. Unfortunately, that did not stop her wand from flying out of her hand and landing on top of Hagrid's small shack.

"Heh," The victorious Auror said with a sinister grin, "now, both you and mister Hagrid will follow me, miss—"

She cut him off with a vicious right hook that sent him sprawling to the ground, nose bloodied.

"Even unarmed, your opponent is dangerous. Never lower your guard for the good old wallop" She quoted, grinning and taking the fallen wand. "Constant Vigilance."

Dusting her reddened knuckles – the bastard had the audacity of bleeding on her? He was gutsy... - on her faded brown coat, Mrs Zabini turned toward Hagrid, who was staring and gaping at her.

"You ok there, Hagrid?"

Hagrid nearly flinched. He had forgotten how much of a fearsome fighter the easygoing and quite often immature woman was said to be. He had heard rumors, but this was the first time he had ever seen her in action.

...if seen was the proper term; he had barely seen that punch fly.

"Er, yeh, sure..." He replied unsteadily.

"Good, that means you can give me back my wand, I think it went somewhere up there," She said, pointing at the roof of his hut.

Although she certainly couldn't see it, Hagrid was tall enough to spot it on the first try. Carefully, he plucked it out from between two loosely tied planks of wood covering the straw isolation underneath – he could have just bothered with an isolation charm, but he had never actually managed those, and he wasn't going to go and beg one of the teachers if he could manage otherwise – and gave it back to her.

With a grateful nod, she used it to deftly tie up the bloodied agent in linen ropes conjured from nowhere. After giving herself a satisfied smirk, the woman turned to the giant man.

"So, Hagrid, care to explain why they were trying to lock you up in the-one-place-I-wouldn't-wish-anyone-to?"

Hagrid nodded slowly, with a growled sigh that sent a nearby bird flying away in fear. "A... I... guess I should, eh..."

Ron Weasley hated the dungeons. They were too damp, too dark and just too darned cold for him to consider wandering in them if he had the choice, even in the heat of the summer. The fact that they were crawling with Slytherins did not help.

Unfortunately, those he was looking for were all Slytherins – either his sister (Merlin it felt strange to say her sister was a Slytherin... but he wasn't going to start that again) or her two friends... McKinnon and Chang, he was pretty sure those were their names. Problem was; he didn't know where any of them were, or where the Slytherin common room's entrance was, and the

hostile looks he was getting from students of that house didn't make him want to ask for help, either.

"Oi, Weasley!" He heard a female voice call. "You lost?"

Never before had he felt so glad to see Pansy Parkinson. Perhaps she wasn't the friendliest face in the school, but she wasn't exactly hostile – this time – and she had good chances of knowing Ginny, since she was in Harry's year. Well, that's what he supposed.

"Actually, I'm looking for Ginny... did you see her anywhere?"

Parkinson sniffed disdainfully. "Finally decided to stop being a pig? Of course it only took you *months* to do it. We had a bet going, you know, and most of us bet you would wait at *least* until June to make things better... I guess I should thank you, you made me a few Gallions richer. Or maybe you don't know what one of *those* is?"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," He waved her off in impatience, ignoring the barb on his wealth. The last thing he needed was to fly off the handle. He had to stay focused and keep his temper in check. Besides, he felt pretty sure there wasn't such a thing as a bet; Hermione would have used that weapon on him a long time ago. "Did you see her?"

"If she's not around here, she's probably on the first floor." She replied. "It *is* nearly time for dinner."

Without even bothering to thank her, Ron quickly left for the upper floors. He felt quite grateful that, at least, his sister was giving him a reason to get away from all those Slytherins.

Pansy scowled. "It was no problem, I'm very happy be helpful..." She grumbled, turning around to prowl deeper in the dungeons. "Stupid Gryffindors..."

Lavender Brown, Pavarti Patil and her Ravenclaw twin sister Padma Patil walked in the corridors, heading the great hall and lunch, idly eavesdropping on every conversation they could. The entire school had been shell-shocked by the thought that Slytherin's heir might attack even Slytherins.

The latest attack made for particularly interesting rumors, though – one of which, the ‘talk of the week’, in Lavender’s opinion, being Ron Weasley’s apparent and sudden devotion to making sure Hermione Granger was safe and sound at every possible moment.

However, considering the two of them had shared a close friendship since the last year, the rest of her house didn’t share her opinion.

Pavarti was talking to her sister about the attack; she was still certain that the messy black-haired, green eyes celebrity of Slytherin, Harry Potter, was the heir, and that Snape was helping him out – “He’s nasty enough!”

“I mean... I told her that hanging around that boy was trouble... the whole darned *house* is trouble, but she just wouldn’t listen. She was an easy target for Potter, so of course he took it, it’s obvious. Now he’s just faking being sad and angry just so people don’t suspect him again...”

“I don’t know,” Padma replied, “I heard from Davies that Petcher said that it looked pretty real. No way Potter’s that good an actor.”

“And he took out Zabini to make absolutely sure *nobody* would suspect him,” Pavarti continued, apparently not hearing her sister at all, “After all, he’s always hanging around her...”

Lavender sighed. Normally, her housemate was pretty open about things, but on subjects involving monsters and Slytherins, Potter being the prime example, she clamped up completely and seemed intent on just convincing herself it was him. Lavender didn’t understand why she was so insistent on it, but it wasn’t like

she could do a lot about it. Her friend was nothing if not stubborn when she wanted to.

They reached a corner and found themselves standing in a completely deserted hallway they easily recognized. Nobody would use *that* part of the school today; it was the site of the first attack.

As soon as she laid her eyes on the hall, however, Lavender immediately noticed something was wrong.

"Hey... Is it just me, or is something different around here?" Padma, who prided herself on being more observant than her sister – and less of a blabbermouth – asked.

"Now that you mention it... hey, look at the wall!" Pavarti gasped, pointing at the wall, where the first message had been written:

The chamber of secrets has been opened! Enemies of the heir, beware!

That was the old message. By now, if someone didn't know about it, it was because they had been hiding under a rock for the last seven months. However, written underneath was a new message... one that froze Lavender's blood as soon as she read it...

Her skeleton shall lay in the chamber forever.

Her startled and horrified shriek echoed in the empty halls of the school.

"Very well, if it is the decision of the council, I'm afraid I have to stand down."

Harry couldn't believe his ears. Five students, one cat and one *ghost* had been petrified pretty much all over the school, and now the Governors were kicking Dumbledore out of his office? Doing *that* would pretty much open the whole school up to the heir! It was almost an invitation, and giant and flashy "Attack now, the school is weak!" neon signpost! And the timing was horrible, too. Just when they had *finally* discovered where it was hidden!

"R-Really?" The minister's voice sounded surprised and flustered, as if he did not think Dumbledore would give in so easily. "B-But Dumbledore, you..."

"Cornelius, like you cannot deny the Wizengamot, I have the council to answer to." Dumbledore said. His voice was getting closer, as if he was heading toward the door against which Harry was pressing his ear to eavesdrop inside. "But know this; whoever will take my place will have to act as quickly as possible, or all will be lost."

Harry blinked. What an odd thing to say; as if he was saying that he had--

"I'm sure whoever it will be shall find better ways to deal with the situation than simply watching as things go out of control." Lucius Malfoy said, none-too-subtly jabbing at Dumbledore in the process.

--well, Malfoy had just summed it nicely.

He could hear footsteps now. Quickly and silently, he ducked against the side of the passage just as the door opened, almost crushing his right hand that had strayed too close. For an instant, he saw the inside of Dumbledore's office – the walls still covered in portraits and still bathed in the light of the large window overlooking the castle, but the office filled from one side to the other in strange, unidentifiable gadgets – but the thin-yet-imposing figure of the headmaster stepped into view.

Harry felt his blood freeze when the headmaster stared directly at him, for an instant. Could he see him under the cape? He became certain when the old man's blue eyes twinkled in what Harry could identify as... satisfaction? Expectation? Yes, it looked like Dumbledore had actually *known* Harry would be there to overhear!

But then... the almost cryptic messages he had told 'Cornelius'... could it have been intended to him? A silent signal for him to act and do his best?

As he thought these words, the headmaster gave a suspiciously agreeing nod, before walking ahead, down the spinning flight of stairs leading to his office, followed, in order, by the 'minister' and Lucius Malfoy.

Only then did the events really register.

The heir was somewhere in the school.

They had found the chamber.

Dumbledore had just been kicked out.

Things were *quickly* spinning out of control, and far more wildly than he had thought beforehand. It was time for action, like Dumbledore had said. It was time to let the part of him that belonged in Gryffindor out to the light.

...well, not completely. He didn't want to *kill* himself.

Draco had wandered the halls a bit after leaving Harry alone at Dumbledore's office. Something was strange about his friend,

lately – how had he known about the first victim? How had he known where the headmaster's office was when even *he*, who received very helpful information whenever he wanted to via his father, hadn't?

Did it have something to do with that weird book they had found in the bathroom, back in February? Could Harry have found a way to read it, and not told him?

He sighed. He was going to have to confront him about that – they were friends, after all, and friends don't hide things from each other, especially not stuff like where the headmaster's office is hidden at – but not now. There would be time for that later.

There was a crowd in the hallway, some distance away, near the wall of the first attack. His curiosity was piqued, but the last thing he wanted was for the heir to slip by him while he was busy sightseeing.

The door to the bathroom was open, when he got there. He didn't exactly remember closing it, but he knew he wouldn't have left it open like that normally, and he had been following Harry at the time. Inside, the Weeping Willow... pardon me, Moaning Myrtle, was sitting on the side of a cubicle, legs crossed behind regular, cheap cotton robes, and her expression cross as well.

"About time you came back!" She huffed, readjusting her and disgustingly ugly large square glasses on her pimpled nose. "Someone just went down there."

His blood frozen, Draco gave a look at the sink, which he now knew concealed the hidden chamber of secrets. Had the heir just gone down again?

"Did you see him? What did he look like?" Draco asked.

"Him?" Myrtle sniffed. "If that was a boy, then I need new glasses, or he needs a new haircut and face. Nope, that was definitely a girl... a bit taller than you, with bright red hair... and a Slytherin, too; I saw her badge."

Draco snorted. That didn't narrow the list down. There were many Slytherins taller than him, and many of them had red hair. Maybe not bright, but who knew what that ghost's idea of 'bright' was. She looked about as sunny as magnetic storm.

"Oh, and she had freckles, too. Lots of them."

Oh. That did. He knew only one person – make that family – with red hair and enough freckles to be called a distinctive mark.

"Ginny?!"

After a second to decide what to do, he burst into a run back in the direction of Dumbledore's office.

"Headmaster, I... You can't... they can't..."

Seeing Professor McGonagall out of words was something of a rarity. It was only in times when she was being emotional – which were rare and sparse indeed – when she was seeing something particularly shocking – such as Hermione wandering the halls with two Slytherins, like the previous year – or under a mixture of both that her vocabulary suffered. Many, who did not like her much, would have paid spades to see this...

...only, perhaps, not, if they had known the price tag on it.

"Er... what's going on?" Gilderoy Lockhart asked, suddenly appearing behind them. "Is there something wrong? Is something happening?"

"I unfortunately have no choice, Minerva." Dumbledore told his deputy, pointedly ignoring Lockhart. "If the council says I must go, then I must go."

"Go? Go where?"

“But... But Albus, the students! What of the attacks... and...”

Dumbledore's piercing eyes gazed directly in her own. “Have no worry, Minerva, I have no doubt that this whole mess will be over within the day.”

“What mess? Hey, could someone explain to me what's happening?”

Lucius Malfoy sniffed disdainfully. “Allow me to doubt that.”

“You may.” Dumbledore replied, eyes twinkling. “But I'd be willing to put a wager on this.”

A snort, “you are senile.”

A nod, “so I've been told.”

“H-Hey, come on! Where are you going, Professor Dumbledore?” Lockhart's whine drifted as the three men and the old woman headed for the exit.

It took a few minutes for Lockhart to realize a few things.

1: That little man following Dumbledore was the minister of magic.

2: Dumbledore had said he had to leave.

3: Lucius Malfoy was there.

4: Lucius Malfoy *hated* Dumbledore with a passion.

And so, he came to this brilliant conclusion after only about ten minutes of deep thought;

He was in the castle. The heir was in the castle. The monster was in the castle. Dumbledore was not.

Solution? The only one he could find. Panicking, he ran to his office to pack his things and leave as soon as humanly possible.

After living at the Burrow, a rather small farmhouse populated by not three or four, like normal families, but *nine* people – seventeen beings, if one included Scabbers, Errol, the ghoul in the attic and their five chickens – for the better part of his life, Ron Weasley had, upon seeing Hogwarts, nearly fainted at the sheer amount of space available. He had never actually minded being in crowded spaces, but the occasionally empty halls of the school were a welcome change...

...most of the time.

Right now, though, Ron felt like murdering the architect of Hogwarts – it seemed that finding someone, unless one stumbled on them by accident, was nothing if not impossible. He had been wandering on the first floor for nearly fifteen minutes, now, and had yet to pass in every corridor surrounding the great hall in search of his wayward sister.

Thinking that, perhaps she had went through the passage from the second floor, the one beside that weird painting of Treehead the Woodfist, Ron used the flight of stairs in the entry hall, barely avoiding bumping into Dumbledore, McGonagall and two other people he didn't have time to guess who they were, to search further.

On the third floor, though, he spotted something that was quite unusual. The wall of the message was surrounded by people, and Filch was trying to push them away. Most of the people stepping away from the crowd looked shocked or scared – one of them, a Ravenclaw girl, even cried in the arms of her boyfriend.

Wondering what was going on, Ron looked...

And suddenly, finding Ginny didn't seem all that important anymore.

"Her skeleton... the heir kidnapped someone?!" Ron gasped, quite too loudly, causing stirs around for those who hadn't read it yet, or those who hadn't realized what it meant.

Angry at him, Filch shooed him away from the crowd with quite a bit of excessive force, not that the boy resisted. He had to find Malfoy and Harry, quickly!

Where would be the most likely places to find those two... he knew they had gone to see the headmaster, but he had completely forgotten to ask for directions; he had no idea where that could be.

However, their next stop after this would be that haunted bathroom where the chamber's opening was.

And so, he turned in the direction of the bathroom, just in time to see Malfoy run out like hell was after him.

"Malf—Bloody hell!"

"Ah, so they think you're the heir, which you're obviously not, so that's why they've come to arrest you and take you to the worst place on the planet on only the grounds of suspicions." Elmira summarized, standing as they were in front of Hagrid's hut

"...yeah, that's abou' it." Hagrid agreed.

She gave a theatrical sigh and loudly declared, for all the animals in the forest to hear, "our country is led by a bunch of blind and daft fools!"

Hagrid snorted and nodded. "Yeh won' hear me arg'ing."

"Good. Now, how about we do something about this whole 'Chamber of secrets' mess?"

"Er... like what?"

"Haven't thought up to that part, but I can always wing it. You with me or you want to stay here and keep these boys company?"

This last line was said with a playful pat on the head of the bloodied Auror, currently hanging upside-down from ropes firmly attached to a nearby tree. Elmira had wanted to use the whomping willow, but the one she had knocked out last was starting to wake up and she had been forced to hurry up a bit.

The man gave a furious protest from behind his gag.

Elmira's wand poked his throat.

He shut up quickly.

Hagrid nodded. If these Aurors went missing for too long, more would come, and he likely would be in even more trouble if he was found alone with those three hanging from that tree.

"All right, let's go then." Elmira said, giving her victim a playful tap on the cheek – that left a red mark – and walking toward the castle.

Draco was panting, now. For some reason, ever since he had joined Hogwarts, he found himself at least one day each year running around until he was exhausted, and continuing until he reached what he wanted... needed to reach.

He hated running. It was something, in his book, that was to be reserved to lower classes; it made him hot, sweaty, stinky, messed his hair and the risk of tripping and falling on his face, possibly damaging himself in one way or another and was simply not fit for one of noble blood like *him*.

"Oi, Malfoy! Wait up!"

There was also the fact that Weasley was faster than him at it. Well, that kinda proved the whole point.

Whirling around, Draco easily spotted his... well, not friend, but acquaintance with a hint of irritation. It was hard not to see a five foot tall twelve years old with bright red hair and freckles in a deserted hallway. And he didn't even look tired, the git!

"What... do you... want..." He panted, cursing himself for sounding so out of breath – not that he was, ofcoursenot – and cursing the act of running for tiring him so. "I have... to find... Harry..."

"I'm here," Harry called, appearing in the corner. Much to Draco's pleasure, he, too, looked out of breath. "And I've got something to say too."

"The heir has kidnapped someone." Ron said.

"Dumbledore's been kicked out." Harry said immediately after, before turning to Draco. "And?"

"Your sister's gone down the chamber." Draco drawled, looking straight at Ron.

"WHAT?!" Both other boys chorused.

"That was my reaction too."

"And you didn't stop her?!" Ron growled, grabbing Draco's collar.

"She went through before I arrived. The ghost girl told me." The boy defended himself, gripping at Ron's wrists to try to make him let go. "Back off!"

"Yeah right, Malfoy... you probably just let her go through—"

"Ron!" Harry snapped, pulling the much taller boy off. "There'll be time for that later! Didn't you hear what's going on?! Dumbledore is gone and the heir has kidnapped Ginny!"

"Actually, from what the ghost told me, she pretty much went in by herself." Draco said.

"Are you saying," Ron growled, "that my sister is the heir?!"

Draco snorted. "That's about as likely as you ever managing to score better than a passing grade in Potions. Besides, unless there's something you're not telling us, you're not a Parselmouth, and neither is she. Theorically, she can't enter the chamber, so..."

"She's being controlled." Harry growled. And he had a feeling he knew by who.

How much of a coincidence was the sudden appearance of a diary belonging to Tom Riddle, the 'golden boy' who had stopped the mess the first time, in the school just as things are starting up again? How much of a coincidence was the fact that Ginny just happened to take possession of the book, and that *she* ended up being 'willingly kidnapped'? No. It was the only possibility.

She was either being controlled against her wishes, or her wishes simply weren't hers anymore.

Either way, it was time to end this.

It was time for Harry to do his 'job'.

Gods he hated it.

“Well, at least now, he won’t be in the way.”

Minerva McGonagall, Harry Potter et la Chambre des Secrets, page 310

(one of her best moments, in my opinion ^_-)

Chapter 22: The Chamber of Secrets (part III)

“This is crazy.”

The three words seemed to have become Draco Malfoy’s mantra as he stared in terror at the gaping dark hole before them, previously concealed behind a dirty, dusty and disused porcelain sink. Harry privately shared his opinion, but he pushed his self-preservation instincts down; lives were at stake, and the last thing he wanted was the school, his second home besides the Zabini’s house, to close.

Ron didn’t look all that afraid, although his brotherly protective urges for his sister could have had a heavy hand in his sudden bravery, as he peered down the opening.

“I can’t see a bottom. It’s just too dark in there.”

“This is crazy.” Draco repeated.

“Throw something down,” Harry suggested.

Ron did, picking up the nearest thing he could find, an empty pot of ink in his bag – “Are you sure your family can afford to lose that, Weasley?” – and dropping it down the hole, ignoring Draco’s barb.

There was an impact sound, followed by many others, until the sounds faded in the depths of the pipe.

"A slide." Harry concluded.

"Who goes first?" Ron asked.

"This is crazy," Draco reminded them.

The two boys glared at him, then looked at each other and, on a common agreement, decided with a nod and a smirk.

Few seconds later, a struggling Draco found himself being stuffed down the pipe.

"I'll kill you both for theeeeeeeeessssss!!!" He screamed in protest, his voice fading away as he disappeared in the darkness.

"Why are we takin' the long way?"

Mrs Zabini sighed. For a 'man of the woods', Hagrid sure seemed to complain a lot. Ok, so maybe he was used to keeping the trails while she had them wander about in thorny bushes... and perhaps the passages she went through were a bit of a tight fit for the large man, but she didn't find any good reason for him to protest this much...

...hmm... ok, so maybe they had been doing that for the last ten minutes. And perhaps it was twice as long as going to Hogwarts would have taken if she had taken the right way.

"I told you before, we want to avoid any Aurors in the way, Hagrid. As much fun as it is bouncing them around the place, they're only here to do their job. And what if one of them is actually competent, or a war veteran?"

"Fine, fine." Hagrid said, along with nearly inaudible grumbling.

As for her, she figured it was a plenty good excuse to deny that she had tried to take them through a shortcut that-was-not-so-short-after-all.

'Maybe I should have risked myself with the Aurors...' She mused as she pushed another thorny rose-like bush out of the way, only to have it whip against the man's large leg.

She was starting to think that walking in plain sight would have been stealthier than sneaking around with Hagrid's protests.

"Sure got a vocabulary, does he?"

Harry nodded absentmindedly at Ron's very accurate description of Draco's irritated – and colorful – appreciation of his (ex-)friends, while looking at their surroundings. They were now in a cold, damp and dark cave; only the pale lights of their lit up wands allowed them to see anything but inky blackness.

The walls were bare stone, without even the tiniest bit of moss; sunlight must have never reached this cave in the last millennium. The ground they had landed on was muddy and squishy – another reason for Draco's complaints – though by no means a comfortable way to land from a slide down twisty and bumpy pipes for at least three hundred feet. The air was chilling cold and smelled strongly of stagnation, although it was perfectly breathable; Harry suspected a charm was at work here.

The cave had only two openings: one of them behind, the metal pipe through which they had stumbled into, and, in front of them, a large, gaping opening to a long, low-roofed and intimidating dark tunnel their wands could not illuminate the end of.

"Come on," Harry cut in Draco's description of their imminent suffering, involving handcuffs, a fifty ton boulder tied to their feet and a lengthy chain tied to their wrists and to fifteen flying, enraged dragons. "Let's go."

Ron nodded. Draco let out a dejected sigh.

"For the record, I think you're both totally bonkers."

"Thank you."

"FINALLY!!"

Elmira nearly shrieked in surprise at her companion's loud shout of relief. Yes, so they had stumbled back onto the path leading up to Hogwarts – and it had only taken them too long to do so – without being found by Aurors – not that she could see any. In her book, it did not give him a reason to feel so relieved...

Although, perhaps the facts that his pant legs were now riddled with holes and tears and that he still had some piece of some incredibly grabby ivy – that reminded her of a certain someone she used to know – stuck in his beard excused his explosion.

"Imira, next time yeh decide teh find a shor'cut, coun' me out!" Hagrid growled.

"Well, look on the bright side," Mrs Zabini said, blushing in embarrassment, "there's only a short way to go!"

Sure enough, the castle gates were now plainly visible. Hagrid nodded in agreement.

"Yeah, but look behind."

The three Aurors hanging from a tree and the small wisps of smoke seeping through the small chimney of Hagrid's shack were plainly visible, not two hundred feet behind them. Their 'shortcut' had barely led them any further ahead.

Elmira's face took on an interesting shade of red, and her feet suddenly seemed extremely interesting.

"C'mon, le's go... *on the real path*, this time 'round."

Soon, they stood before the tall, oak doors guarding the entrance of the castle. The imposing building was silent, almost eerily so; normally, voices could be heard seeping through the thin cracks in the old wood. However, even the owls seemed to have gone silent. Elmira felt chills go up her spine.

Hagrid battered his bowling ball-sized fist against the door. However, they did not move.

"Aw, ruddy—it's locked!" Hagrid growled. "Who the hell was stupid 'nough to lock it?!"

Elmira shrugged and took out her wand. It was time for the good old 'burst the door open'.

Gilderoy Lockhart panted in exhaustion; behind him, tied on the same long piece of old, nearly unraveled rope trailed a dozen colorful trunks, filled with everything he had brought to the school, most of them being painting paintings of himself and books - his own, of course.

The halls were empty. Good. The last thing he wanted was to answer awkward questions, or to be asked to search for the chamber himself. No. He doubted his amnesia charms could do *anything* against something that petrifies people. He might not be the brightest candle around, but he wasn't *stupid*.

No, really!

He didn't see anyone, living or not, anywhere on his way to the entry hall, where he immediately let go of the rope and tried to pry the doors open. In his panic, he didn't notice the door was locked until a few seconds had passed. After a few seconds of impotent fumbling with the bar blocking the door – it was quite a bit heavier than it looked, and that was saying something – he finally heard voices from the other side... and one of them said something about an... expulsion?

BANG

The door violently opened, tearing the locking bar apart and knocking him back against one of his trunks, which opened and showered him in fancy, colorful cloaks and robes.

"Well, well." A female voice drawled. "Look what we have here."

Lockhart looked up and immediately, though indirectly, recognized the woman. The shape of her face, the color of her hair, that *infuriating* smirk... he had seen it all year long on that little devil Zabini's face. That lady was obviously her mother. Although he had a feeling he had seen her somewhere before...

And behind her was the unmistakable bulk of Hagrid, who glared down at him in anger.

"Leavin', Lockhar'?" Hagrid growled.

Lockhart noticed his fists clenching. At that moment, he could easily imagine his head being in one of those hands. Yes, it would be a snug fit, and probably very uncomfortable should he close it.

Oh, now he remembered that woman ... She was that loose cannon who had shot at Mr Malfoy during his autograph session back in Flourish and Blotts...

...she had her wand drawn and didn't look happy...

"Meep..." he squeaked.

"Did I mention that you're both bonkers?"

Ron and Harry barely held back a sigh of exasperation. It was bad enough that the ground they were walking on was rough and uneven, causing them to trip up more than once, and that they only had the pale lights of their wands to light up their way. Even worse was the way the shadows brought by the flickering glows seemed to flicker and wave with life, as if they were surrounded by a hundred unseen shapes. More than once, the two boys shivered, although whether it was from fright or from the damp numbing-cold stagnant air, neither knew.

Draco's voice, echoing in the dark as it did, did not help soothe their frazzled nerves.

"Yes you did, more than once, Malfoy." Ron snapped, his voice amplified to thunderous levels by the echo and ghostly silence of the cave.

"Oh, just thought you'd like to know I think *this is crazy*." The last few words were stressed, which was an interesting effect in a lazily terrified drawl.

Harry sighed, while Ron clenched his fists and jaws, apparently resisting the urge to deck the smaller boy.

While he behaved wonderfully whenever his life wasn't in danger, Harry knew Draco easily became terrorized by any mortal dangers – Quidditch notwithstanding; very few people died playing it, after all. Harry figured the Malfoy heir loved himself too much to voluntarily walk into danger without being forced, and even then it was reluctantly.

It wasn't *quite* cowardice – a coward would have turned tail and ran off by now – but it was close. Harry wasn't going to say that in his face, though.

He hoped Ron wouldn't get to the same conclusion; the taller boy would have no qualms at telling Draco, and would gladly do so quite loudly for the entire castle to hear.

"Hey, I see something," Ron's voice broke his musings and brought him back to the depths of the cave they were trudging in. "Over there!"

The taller boy upped the pace, followed by Harry. Draco let out a whimpering mutter and followed along, though at a slower pace.

The cave bent and twisted ahead and its roof rose to reasonable heights, allowing the three boys to stand to their full heights. And in that area, they found something.

"What the hell is *that*!?" Draco gasped in horror.

Lying before them was a twisted mass of faded, sickly grey... something. Harry thought it looked familiar and then thought back of Nemesis, who had shed his skin a few weeks ago. Sure enough, if he looked closely, he could faintly see the outline of scales; the skin was in a pitiful condition.

"A shed snake skin." Harry said, taking a step forward to check closer – more out of morbid curiosity than anything else – and stopped when he felt and heard something crack under his foot. Curious, Harry bent on one knee.

Littering the floor were hundreds of rat skeletons. Remains of the Basilisk's meals, probably.

"Whew," Ron whistled, inspecting the skin, "That is one hell of a long snake. I'd say something like... thirty or forty feet long..."

Harry had to nod in agreement. The page had warned them that the basilisk could reach "Gigantic sizes", but until this moment, he hadn't really realized exactly how absolutely *huge* that would be. This discovery only made him realize in exactly how much trouble they were in, and what a fearsome beast they would perhaps end up facing against – not literally, though.

Perhaps. Read: Hopefully not.

A cracking attracted his attention toward Draco, who had taken a step back directly into some unfortunate rat's skull. If the boy had looked scared before, he was now terrorized, staring at the skin in horror.

"Draco? Are you ok?" Harry asked.

The boy let out an undecipherable mumble and took another step backward, tripping on a fold of the skin and landing on the rocky ground on his bum.

Harry gave a look at the large, empty skin's "head". It looked large enough to easily swallow someone whole, and Harry had seen Nemesis dislocate his jaw to eat a particularly large piece of meat. Add to that arsenal the Basilisk's deadly eyes, and all it would take was one instant of hesitation... One mistake and...

...he was starting to agree with Draco. This was crazy.

Right. Draco was right. He and Ron had been stupid from step one. They had to warn a teacher, someone older, someone more experienced...

"Come on, let's tell someone," Harry said, shaking his head and getting up back, dusting his robes. "This is out of our-"

"No."

Ron's forceful interruption startled both boys into looking at him. His fists were clenched, his jaw set and his ears reddening in boiling-hot fury.

"No," he repeated, glaring at them. "What about Ginny? If we go back and get a teacher, it'll be too late—"

"It might *already* be too late!" Draco snapped. "For all we know, she's already snake-food!"

As he said this, he gave a sharp kick at a rat skull, which skipped twice on the ground to land by Ron's shoe.

"And she might still be alive!" Ron snapped, kicking the skull back directly on the blonde's shin before turning around to head deeper in the cave. "Just because you're a heartless bastard doesn't mean I'll give up."

"Ron, stop!"

"Make me," He snapped, glaring at Harry, angry tears in his eyes. "I thought at least *YOU'D* care."

"I *do* care. I owe your family." He replied hotly.

"And she's *my* family."

"What a fine time to admit it." Draco mumbled sarcastically.

Harry stopped. It just wouldn't do anything for him to make Ron mad. Besides, he had a point. There might be a chance Ginny was still alive, and that, perhaps, they'd be able to save her, Basilisk or not.

He *did* owe them. And he didn't want to be indebted to the Weasleys for too long...

...who was he trying to kid. It had nothing to do with the debt.

"She's my friend." Harry replied to Ron. "And my friends are my family."

The red-head did not reply.

Behind them, Draco sighed.

"So I take it you're still going, eh?"

Harry gave him a look. "course I am."

Ron smiled at him gratefully.

Draco sighed dejectedly. "I'll say it again, you're both certifiable."

Both taller boys snorted. The tension suddenly seemed to have grown a ton lighter.

"If you don't want to go on, go warn a teacher." Harry reminded them. "At least if we fail, they'll know where the chamber is, and they'll be able to do something"

Draco nodded before giving Harry a funny look.

"Are you sure you shouldn't be a Gryffindor?"

"I'll let that appalling insult slide because there's no time for proper payback." Harry replied flatly, grinning. "Come on, off you go!"

The platinum-haired boy nodded, turned around and went back the path they had taken in the first place. But before leaving, he turned back to Harry.

"You do realize that Blaise will kill you if you don't come back."

Harry nodded with a grin and shrugged. "If I don't, at least tell her I've tried."

"Tell her yourself. Oh, and Weasley?"

"Yeah?"

"I am certainly *not* a bastard."

And he was gone.

Ron and Harry spent few seconds blankly staring disbelievingly at the spot he had been standing at.

"He... didn't deny being heartless." Ron noted slowly.

"That's Draco for you," Harry replied with a shrug and a snort. "Come on, let's go."

The teacher's lounge looked much like it did every day at 12:32, during a day off. The fire was barely lit, the sun was streaming in brightly through the thin sky blue silk curtains set in front of the windows, Binns was, as usual, lounging and sleeping peacefully in his chair – the very same one he had died in years ago – where he would be until exactly 4:27 PM when he would wake up to flawlessly review his lessons by memory, and the other teachers were arguing about something.

No, that was not unusual. I'm not trying to be sarcastic, for once. It's true, I swear! Er... Sorry, off subject.

No, it was not unusual for the teachers to argue like this; most of the time, though, only Professors Minerva McGonagall and Severus Snape were involved, the subject tended to hover around house points, and only one of the sides was actively raising her tone, the other much preferring the dark and sarcastic undertones of a low voice.

What was unusual today was that people were arguing in the room, that the head of Slytherin was not yet present, and that McGonagall was silent, sitting in her usual, tartan couch and rubbing her temples in irritation.

The reason for the argument?

"I mean, who could it be? The heir really has gone too far this time..."

As Professor Sinistra had just so nicely resumed, it was the latest ‘act of terror’ of the heir of Slytherin.

“And you say the young Weasley is missing, Professor?” Professor Flitwick asked McGonagall for the thousandth time.

The first thing the teachers had done, upon finding the message had been to send all the students to their common rooms – well, except in Flitwick’s case, seeing as he burst out crying – and make the list of them. To the consternation of everyone, Ronald Weasley, of a family already attacked by the heir, had turned out missing.

This was the reason Professor Snape was still missing; the Slytherin common room was a good distance away from the teacher’s lounge, and his students tended to spread out a lot more than the other houses’.

“Yes he is.” McGonagall acknowledged for the thousandth time. She felt a headache growing steadfastly and, at that moment, would have given *anything* to have the headmaster in the room. If *he* was there, she would have trusted herself to make the right decisions, since he would have corrected her in case of a mistake. He was, after all, always right.

OK... almost always. Close enough.

“But the message said ‘her’,” the ever-logical professor Vector, who taught Arithmancy, reminded them, “So the newest victim cannot be him. Was there anyone missing in your houses, Filius, Pompona?”

“No,” Flitwick said with a vigorous shake of his head. “Everyone was safe and accounted for.”

“Same with mine.” Sprout agreed.

“Then the other only possibility is that the victim is, once again, a Slytherin.” Vector finished calmly.

“Keen on attacking his own house, isn’t he?” Sinistra muttered darkly.

Just then, Professor Snape strode in through the door, cape billowing as usual. In his hand was a piece of paper that held the names of every Slytherin currently at Hogwarts.

"Three of my students are missing," Snape said. "Two of them, I should not have been surprised, but the third, I have to admit, startled me."

"Cut the dramatics, Snape," McGonagall snapped, "And get to the point."

"Who are they?" Flitwick asked.

"Misters Draco Malfoy and Harry Potter," Snape said, with a roll of his eyes, "and miss Ginny Weasley."

"And once again, it's Potter to the rescue." McGonagall muttered.

"The only girl who is missing is miss Weasley." Vector said. "Logically, she is the one the heir is talking about. Only three students are missing except for them, including young mister Potter, who is, as we all know, a Parselmouth—"

"Mr Potter is *not* the heir." Snape snapped.

"I do not think so either," Vector continued, on the same, calm tone of voice, "but logically..."

"Lockhart isn't here, either." Sprout commented. "It could be him."

There was a sudden explosion of disbelieving snorts.

"Right, never mind." Sprout sighed.

"Anyhow," McGonagall loudly said, "where could our 'three musketeers' be? If young Weasley knows already, I have no doubt that he is somehow searching for the chamber, most like with Mister Potter and, if somehow his sister's safety counterbalances the intense family hatred, mister Malfoy."

"And with young Potter's luck, they've found it already." Snape growled.

"They'd go for a teacher if they did, right?" Sinistra asked.

The door suddenly burst open to reveal Draco Malfoy, sweaty, out of breath, his normally flawless hair a mess, one arm on his side, the other holding his less-than-imposing weight against the doorsill.

"Found... chamber... Harry... Weasley..." He panted.

Snape groaned a mumbled something about *déjà vu*, while the other teachers stared and processed the information.

The race was on.

“Voldemort is my past, my present and my future, Harry Potter...”

Tom Marvolo Riddle, Harry Potter et la Chambre des Secrets, page 330

Chapter 23: The Chamber of Secrets (part IV)

Harry was starting to miss being called a nut. At least being annoyed by Draco's constant whining had distracted him and Ron from the reality of what lay ahead of them, made only more tangible by their previous discovery. Now, with nothing but the sound of their footsteps against the stones, the ethereal shadows dancing around them and the oppressing sound of their stressed breathing, Harry was starting to wish he was back in the common room, with a cup of hot chocolate in his hands.

“Look.”

The word seemed thunderous and almost startled Harry into screaming. Ron, as well, seemed surprised at the volume of his voice, the problem lying in the fact that he had uttered but a mere whisper.

Ahead of them was a dimly lit natural stone wall where there seemed to be twice as many dancing shadows than elsewhere. He knew it was an optical illusion, but it still brought chills to his spine.

Carved into the wall was a large, ornate stone door adorned with dozens of emerald-eyed snake designs. On each side stood

ancient slate statues of majestic coiled snakes ready to strike, fangs poised, green stone eyes glaring at them...

Harry could have sworn their heads moved to glare at them.

And so, it was easy for him to look at them and utter a single word in Parseltongue:

“Open.”

And the doors did in a sudden, thunderous explosion of rumbling sounds. Slowly, the enormous rock sculptures moved aside, revealing a large room behind.

The room was decently lit by burning torches, attached to the two rows of columns that appeared to be made to resemble hundreds of twirled and knotted snakes in a large mass coming out of twin pools of inches deep, crystal-clear water, on each side of a brick walkway in front of them. At the end of the room stood a statue of someone Harry recognized at first sight, seeing as his picture hung in the Slytherin common room, just above the doors to the dormitories.

“Salazar Slytherin.” Harry whispered, in awe.

His voice was weaker here; though imposing, the room was filled with plenty of natural noise; the crackling of the burning torches, the trickling of the small jets of water causing ripples in the pools and the slight sound of an unnatural breeze circling the room were gentle, almost soothing. He felt himself relax as he admired the intertwined snakes design covering the pillars...

Roughly, he pulled himself back to attention; this was no time to admire the scenery, as breathtakingly beautiful as it was. The heir and the Basilisk could be anywhere, ready to surge. With the noise the doors had made when they had opened, Harry seriously doubted the effect of surprise was on their side.

With the way the chamber was built, the only covers against the Basilisk or against the heir's spells would put them feet-deep in water – no chance of hiding properly whatsoever. The walkway was bare and straight, so no hiding there either. For a second, he

wished he had brought his cloak, or even Nemesis with him. The snake could have distracted the heir or something...

Ok. What *did* they have?

Surprise? One word: doors. The only surprise he *could* pull off was with his dark magic, but he didn't want Ron to know he had learned some of it: too many questions, too many risks, too many difficultly predictable things... no. He wouldn't dare, unless things were really bad. A trump card, of sort.

Strength? He doubted it. So, Blaise had showed him dueling techniques and he had learned a few from Mrs Zabini's books, but that, in no way, made him an expert. On the other hand, the heir commanded a Basilisk, and, seeing as he had found the chamber, was probably a great deal older than them and, therefore, more powerful.

Numbers? Hardly – it was the heir, older and more experienced than he and Ron, with his Basilisk, who could kill with a glance. In this case, being of equal number didn't really matter.

...Draco had been right, this was crazy.

The only chance they *did* have to survive was to get Ginny and get out as quickly as possible.

It did not take him long to find her; at the end of the walkway, near the enormous feet of the statue of his house's founder, a familiar-looking figure with mid-back, orange-red hair was sprawled. She was not moving.

And the heir?

He couldn't see anyone else.

The whole situation reeked of a trap.

“Ginny!” Ron gasped as he spotted his sister and broke into a run.

“Ron, wait!”

Too late. The instant Ron came close to his sister, a brilliant dome of white light appeared around her, shoving the red-head boy away. With a dull thud, the boy hit a nearby pillar and slid down the intertwined stone snakes in a boneless heap to land in the shallow water.

He didn't have time to check up on his friend that a sound reverberated around the chamber. A rumbling, sinister sound that made Harry pull his wand out of his wrist-held holster.

Chuckling.

"That's the reason why I like to mess around with Gryffindors, most are so easily predictable it's simple to use them, like pawns."

Walking out of the shadows behind the statue of Salazar Slytherin, a tall, green-eyed, black-haired, translucent boy smirked at Harry. The younger boy didn't need to be told his name; he knew it already.

"Tom Riddle?"

With a nod, the boy from the past's sinister grin grew wider. "Harry Potter."

Harry did not react. Instead, his eyes found Ginny's sprawled shape, where the small, leather-bound book could be seen peeking from under her arm.

"It was you all along, wasn't it." It was not a question; Harry was certain of his accusation. "And you've been using Ginny to go around."

"You are, indeed, much sharper than I thought you'd be, Potter." Tom said in confirmation. "Oh, believe me, I did not have an easy year, at all... Little Ginny was far from cooperative, at times..."

Harry did not reply. Instead, he furtively shot looks around the room while listening with one ear. Where could the basilisk be hiding?

"Where did she find you?" Harry asked, if only to keep the conversation going. It gave him more time to find the bigger problem.

"She said she found my diary in one of her books; with all the problems she had, she decided it would be a good idea to use it. After all, she wound up with a brand new diary that nobody had used before! Quite unusual, for her..."

Harry absentmindedly nodded. Perhaps the basilisk hid among the pillars?

"I became her friend, her confident. She would tell me anything she didn't want anyone else to know, for a reason or another..."

"I was patient, very patient... it was very boring to listen to the woes and sadness of an idiot eleven years old girl, even though she had more problems than most. But she confided in me, she trusted me... oh, not completely, no, but close. She was certain that I could simply never reveal everything she told me; her woes with her brothers, her misadventures in classes and, most important of all, *would the great and so incredibly nice Harry Potter ever love her?*

"It was, at times, entertaining, but most of it was very tiring... But eventually, she had told enough of herself and put enough of her soul in my diary for me to put some of mine in her..."

"And you started attacking people." Harry turned his attention back at Tom. Wherever the basilisk was, it was too well hidden.

Tom nodded. "If only to make sure everyone stayed on edge... I didn't want her to get less problems and talk to me less, after all.

"You see, any good or happy thing she wanted to say, she told *you* or those friends of hers, but if anything went wrong and she didn't want you to worry, she went to *me*. The solution was easy – I only had to make sure to keep her worried and unsure. Accomplishing it, with you, Zabini and her friends around, was a bit harder, though.

"Yet, after that stupid girl brought the Jusenkyo powder in the school, Ginny started to get in a better mood... that little episode of chaotic insanity had lifted her spirits a bit too much.

"I decided she was getting too happy, so I did my best to give her wrong advice, such as helping her compose that valentine."

"That was her?!" Harry gasped, blinking. He vaguely remembered shoving Ginny out of his way in his anger. Now that he remembered, he felt quite ashamed.

"Unfortunately for me," Riddle continued as if Harry had never interrupted him, "that idea backfired; she became furious at me and I was sure that, when she got rid of my diary and threw it down the toilet, it would be a longer time still before I could enact my revenge and finish Slytherin's noble work... until you came and wrote in me. Oh, I did my best to convince you that I was trustworthy, and I even showed you my capture of that big oaf, Hagrid—"

"But you messed up. I never believed for one second Hagrid was guilty. I knew you framed him." Harry interrupted, taking a bit of pleasure in twisting the knife.

"But you were much cleverer than I had put you for," Tom corrected forcefully, glaring at him angrily. "Ginny's description of you wouldn't have been out of place in an old Greek legend. I had made the mistake of thinking she had exaggerated – quite a bit rightly, but apparently not enough – because of her sizable crush on you. After all, an eleven years old lovestruck girl would believe even the lowest thief to be a hero in the right light.

"I must admit doing two mistakes like that was almost my undoing. Fortunately, by then, I had enough of a grip on Ginny to talk to her in her dreams... After being told that I would reveal all her secrets to you, she was awfully cooperative. She fished the diary out of your trunk while you were busy plowing that Hufflepuff to the ground. Excellent performance, by the way, I would have loved to see it."

Harry almost felt ill at being complimented for *that* by *him*.

"Since I was closer to her then," Tom continued, "I could control her body more completely than before. I made sure she carried the diary in her backpack and never took it far away from her.

"I made Ginny unleash the monster again, this time to leave you a parting message by targeting that Mudblood friend of yours, Granger. Zabini was in the way, but she was just another Mudblood, she was expandable as well. She put up a great act of bravado, but no amount of courage can stand up to the deadly gaze of the basilisk."

"You've been targeting me." That wasn't a question either.

Tom nodded. "Indeed. You see, Ginny told me *everything* of you... including your *fascinating* story, the one where you, a one year old little brat, not even strong enough to lift a storybook by yourself, defeated the greatest, most powerful dark lord of the century and escaped with nothing but a tiny scratch on your forehead."

Taken aback, Harry blinked. Why would he care about that?

"You see," Tom continued, "I'm quite interested in knowing *how* that happened... what, exactly, is so special about you to have caused the fall of the most powerful dark lord of the century... You wouldn't happen to know, by any chance?"

"I don't know," Harry replied truthfully and as calmly as he could force himself to sound, "maybe you should ask Dumbledore... If you don't mind, I can go and get him for you."

It was a bluff, or perhaps more of a joke for his frazzled nerves. Or, perhaps, it was a simple act to test Riddle's reaction. To his surprise, the other boy burst out laughing. A high-pitched, sinister, cold laugh that sounded oddly... familiar.

"Don't you know? Dumbledore has left the school, boy!" Riddle chortled. "As we are speaking, my loyal servant is driving him away!"

'Loyal servant?'

"You have servants?" Harry blurted without thinking.

Tom chortled again. "Of course I do... and the reason why is the same reason why I want to know how you got rid of Lord Voldemort. You see, his destiny is quite closely intertwined with mine... in fact—"

With a wave of his wand, Tom made the letters of his name appear in mid-air, just over his head.

TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE

Then, with another wave, he moved them. With every letter that placed itself, Harry felt his throat tighten.

I AM LORD VOLDEMORT

"You could even say we are one and the same." Riddle finished victoriously.

"N...No..." Harry mumbled, disbelieving.

Tom Riddle... was Voldemort?

Once more, Tom burst out laughing just as Harry's scar tinged painfully. Now that Harry knew, he could easily identify where he had heard that laugh before – in his nightmares, along with a terrified scream and a brilliant, blinding flash of green...

"Everything is going perfectly according to my plan... Dumbledore is gone, you are helpless and soon to be dead, the school is terrified and cowering away in their common rooms, ready to be picked, one by one, until there is no filth left... Soon, I'll be able to get out and, using the Basilisk left behind by my ancestor, Salazar Slytherin, I will rise once more, using the list of my most loyal servants given to me by my outside help..."

"And, the world will once again fear and tremble before the name of Voldemort..."

Tom Riddle... was Voldemort.

Tom Riddle had manipulated Ginny and controlled her during the whole year, making her miserable on purpose...

Tom Riddle had petrified Norris, Percy Weasley, Creevey, Finch-Fletchley and the bloody baron...

Tom Riddle had killed his parents...

Tom Riddle had tried to kill Hermione and Blaise...

The paralyzing grip of fear that had clutched at his heart was replaced by intense, cold fury at the thought. His forehead burst into flaming heat in response, while his wand turned icy cold and was surrounded by an aura of malevolent dark blue light.

“You’ve made another mistake, Riddle...” Harry hissed in anger, glaring directly into the startled emerald eyes on his nemesis’ face. “NEVER GLOAT! STUPEFY!”

He couldn’t exactly remember if he had ever cast a spell this powerful – it seemed that his entire fury and anger were powering it; the ray of light shot out of his wand with not the usual gunfire-like detonation, but a powerful, deafening roar of thunder, and went toward Riddle with excellent accuracy at a speed he doubted even a golden snitch could reach.

Inside his heart, he knew it wasn’t enough. Even if the spell *did* have the desired effect, it wouldn’t be enough to satisfy him...

Only proper (murder) vengeance would be enough... He wanted Riddle (dead) gone...

He wasn’t too surprised when the spell harmlessly passed through Riddle’s translucent head and impacted against the statue’s leg with enough strength to send a foot-wide chip flying off

against the back wall, from where it fell into a snake-mouth fountain, shattering it and causing a powerful jet of water to splash all over the walkway.

For a few seconds, Tom stared at the smoking hole in Slytherin's stone knee, his eyes thinning in deep thought.

"Well, I must admit I'm impressed," he said after a while. "You're quite powerful for your age." Then, with a careless shrug, he turned his eyes back at Harry, a smirk tugging at his lips. "Well, it doesn't matter... as you have noticed, or at least I hope you have, you can't hurt me..."

(Hurt)

Harry, still sneering in pure fury, did not reply, instead concentrating on a way – any way – to hurt Riddle.

"Now, I think we've talked enough... it's time for the main event..."

The anger vanished instantly, once again replaced by fear. He wouldn't...

Tom turned his face toward the statue, grinning ferally. "*Speak to me, Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts four!*"

And, slowly, the statue's mouth slid open in a thunderous rumble, reverberating across the chamber.

"FFFFinally fffreee..." He heard the same malevolent voice he had heard two times before hiss. He managed to see, for an instant, a dark green... something... slither out of the statue's mouth, before he reminded himself of the extreme danger of actually *looking* at that thing. Forcefully, he closed his eyes.

"Ah, so you know about my ancestor's... parting present, don't you?" Tom asked, his voice filled with cold confidence. "You are, indeed, quite a bit sharper than I had taken you for. If things had been different, I might even have been tempted to ask you to join me, but seeing as you could become a problem, I'll just deal with you now." A pause. "*Kill him.*"

Harry felt more than heard the approach of the snake. The crackling of the fires suddenly seemed a hundred times louder, if only to put a hamper on his ability to find the enormous snake.

'If only I could look at it...'

Then look...

'No, I'll get killed if I do...'

With no hope of facing the monster and come out alive, Harry did the next best thing. He ran, his eyes tightly shut, hoping he wouldn't...

His foot suddenly found itself landing in something wet.

...get off the walkway. Crap. So much for hopeful thinking. Now, if only he could manage to get to the end of the chamber without hitting his face on a pillar—

To his credit, he didn't. Instead, his foot found an obstacle... A quite fleshy one, covered with wet cloth...

RON!!

Just his luck, he had run the exact direction where he friend had fallen!

And hearing Tom Riddle's sudden laugh, which Harry found to sound quite a bit scarier in the darkness behind his eyelids, he had guessed correctly.

"Friends getting in your way, Potter?" Tom asked with a snigger.

"*Sssso close...I can sssmell blood,*" he heard the Basilisk's gleeful voice hiss – it sounded like it came from barely a few yards away!

Panicking, Harry tried to stand back up, but tripped into Ron's robes again, it seemed like they had ensnared his ankle. His fall was harmlessly broken by his hands, but caused his glasses to slide off his nose and land with a loud splash in the shallow water.

Now truly terrified, Harry didn't think – he opened his eyes to look at his stuck ankle...

The basilisk was a single yard behind him...

Reflexively, Harry looked up with a blurry vision at his foe's face...

Only to stare directly into a pair of cruel, globular yellow eyes...

“There is a strange resemblance between us, Harry Potter. You must have noticed. Both of us have Muggle blood, both of us are orphans, raised by Muggles. And we’re probably the only Hogwarts students who can speak Parseltongue since the time of the great Slytherin himself. Even physically, we look alike... but in the end, the only thing that saved you from me is chance...”

Tom Marvolo Riddle, Harry Potter et la chambre des secrets, page 334

Chapter 24: The Chamber of Secrets (part IV)

Harry was running in an inch-deep pool of water, his frantic and terrified pace rhythmically sending splashing sounds echoing about the large room. Behind him, an enormous snake was taking chase, its movements tracing sinister lines in the water. He had to get away; if the Basilisk reached him, he was dead. If he looked back, he was dead. If he reached the outside of the room, then...

Then, he’d see.

...he didn’t really know if that would help him, but at that point, his mind was willing to accept any glimmer of hope.

Unfortunately, because he had ran blindly to avoid any chance of ending face-to-face with the Basilisk’s deadly gaze, his right foot suddenly collided against Ron Weasley’s leg, his fall stopped reflexively by his hands. Hearing the snake approach, ignoring Tom Riddle’s taunt from the other end of the room, Harry tried to scramble to his feet again, but ended up falling again, his glasses slipping off his nose and landing on the water; his foot was stuck in a fold of his friend’s drenched robe.

Instantly, he thoughtlessly looked back to see what had stopped him, his bare emerald eyes opening...

At that instant, the Basilisk reached him...

For an instant, both stared at each other's eyes...

...and nothing happened after an instant.

"...eh?" Harry blinked, thoroughly confused as he stared directly into one of the snake's large yellow eyes, yet didn't feel anything wrong - he still felt warm and still needed to breathe, symptoms that even a child his age knows aren't common for dead people.

Absentmindedly, he noted that, once again, he had become the boy-who-lived. He did not rejoice.

The Basilisk seemed quite surprised as well and, if it hadn't been a snake, Harry was fairly certain it would have had the dejected, depressed look of a child with a broken toy.

"Not dead...?" It hissed.

"Er... sorry?" Harry replied, not quite sure of how to react. His heart was still beating like a punk music drummer and the adrenalin rush was still going strong all over his body.

"How can you still be alive?!" Tom roared. "You took the gaze directly!!"

Harry gave him a look and forced himself to calm down - the more off-balance Riddle was, the better for him. It looked like Riddle had no idea what had just happened, either. "Err... My lucky-lucky Guardian angel?" he suggested.

As if on cue, the Basilisk seemed to remember it had other weapons at its disposal. With almost blinding speed, the snake opened its jaws to reveal them:

Two, large, pointy fangs coated in a shimmering viridian fluid - probably venom. Behind those imposing teeth, he could see the Basilisk's long, forked, reddish tongue, and beyond that was the gaping black and red hole of its throat, from which a strong odor of decay stank, nearly stunning him with disgust.

With a near-shriek of alarm, Harry fumbled to his feet, picking up his glasses in the process, and hastily backed away. Eyes or not, big, nasty and poisonous fangs would be more than enough to do him in... if they reached him, that is.

Ok, so the Basilisk had fangs, possibly with one of the most potent venom in the world – not that he really wanted to test its deadliness; just-a-bit poisonous was just-a-bit too much for him. It also was very large and could quite possibly crush him by accident. Then, there was the slight – and rather blood-curling – possibility of being eaten alive and dying either digested or suffocated – its breath stunk badly enough for that.

What did he have?

Well, he had his wand.

A wizard's wand is like a weapon, an all-purpose tool and a lifeline rolled into one. Losing one's wand was like losing one's identity as a wizard. Without them, they are very much helpless against anything. With them, however, they are a force to be reckoned with.

At that moment, though, Harry quite wondered what he could do with it; poking the snake in the eye seemed to be a bad idea.

Let's see... the information on the Basilisk... huge snake, check. Poisonous fangs, check. Scares spiders off – and quite possibly twelve years old Slytherin boys – check.

Ah, right. The cry of a rooster kills it.

...now, where could he find a rooster?

Transfiguring one on the spot was out of question already: they didn't learn transfiguration involving living beings until fourth year – so Hermione had said, anyway. Plus, Transfiguration had never been his strong point. And there was the fact that, with a forty-bloody-feet long crawler trying to bite his limbs, arse and/or head off, he could hardly find time to visualize anything turning into a rooster.

Scrap that idea, then. Time for plan #2:

"STUPEFY!!"

So, perhaps it was a bit stupid to believe that the almighty king of serpents, one of the creatures classed as extremely dangerous by every single book on monsters, chosen vassal of lord Slytherin's revenge, meant to kill off every Muggle-born student in the school, could be taken out with a simple stunning hex, even one aimed at its eye.

Perhaps he was hoping that the snake's defenses weren't planned for someone immune to its glare, or perhaps he was just desperate, but he felt a pang of hope rise in his gut.

Hope quickly crushed when the snake's eyelid shut itself at lightning-fast speeds and the crimson ray of light ricocheted, harmlessly landing against a pillar and leaving a scorch mark.

As if to antagonize him further, Riddle burst out in that high-pitched and frankly irritating laugh of his. "Well, it doesn't matter if you can stand its gaze; if that's your best shot, it looks like you'll die anyway!" He gloated.

'That wasn't my best shot...' Harry mused as he backed away from the approaching reptile; it seemed to like the chase, and was taking its sweet time getting closer, like a limbless cat stalking a humanoid mouse.

After another quick weighing of his chances, Harry decided it was time to invoke a Slytherin law: When fair means have failed you, it's time to resort to foul.

At that moment, the Basilisk's mouth burst open again and half of its body uncoiled, launching the deadly fangs forward. Harry barely avoided the attack and, instead, the basilisk rammed directly against a pillar, stunning itself few a few seconds. With a frankly evil grin, Harry quickly remembered one of his Christmases

at the Dursleys', and thought of the spell that could possibly be the most effective in this situation.

"Imperio!"

Harry had almost gotten used to the power rush that came with the casting of dark magic. He had gotten fairly accustomed to the intense chill his wand took and of the bursting heat on his forehead.

Yet, after the almost vaporous ray of magical light rammed against the snake's closed eyelid and seeped underneath, the feelings that assaulted him were so intense that he was taken off-guard – this was much... much... better/worse/interesting – he couldn't decide – than when he was being taught by the lexicon...

However, as he felt his mind push the Basilisk's aside to take over its body, he realized an immediate problem: it was much more difficult, as well. The snake, unlike the book's "rats", resisted the intrusion and instinctively pushed back.

And suddenly, Harry's mind was filled with images he had never seen before, yet felt like he did. He felt his tiny fangs sink into the soft, rubbery flesh of a toad while the rest of his limbless body was still half coiled inside a chicken egg... he saw the face of someone who could stand his gaze... someone who gave him a purpose...

Salazar Slytherin, Harry realized absentmindedly.

...the face of Tom Riddle, who also stood his gaze calmly, if with a bit of surprise... The face of a plump, black haired boy, not even eleven years old, his eyes wearing glasses, an instant before he fell, petrified... the face of a lanky young man with red hair, wearing a prefect badge, looking at him from a wall-mirror in a bathroom... the face of a young girl with large glasses in her hand, who stared back with tear-filled eyes...

Myrtle

...the faces of Mrs. Norris, through a puddle of water, Percy Weasley, a bunch of freshly picked flowers in his hand, re-

adjusting his glasses in disbelief, Creevey, looking through his camera, trying to catch him on film, Finch-Fletchley and the Bloody Baron, the former staring through the latter...

A tiny mirror peeking out of a corner, while he obediently slid behind Ginny, the faces of Blaise and Hermione just barely visible through it...

The shock suddenly jolted him out of what he realized were not his thoughts, but the Basilisk, apparently trying to invade his mind. Not quite knowing how to fight back, Harry sent more of his strength to the spell while ignoring the images. He felt his forehead give an especially strong burn, and then...

...he saw himself... yet he saw the Basilisk... he saw Tom from the corner of his yellow eyes, yet he did not from his green ones... he only had a tail, yet he had legs and arms...

He had done it. He had managed to use the Imperius curse on a true living creature, he realized with a rising wave of pride.

Testing his power over the much larger creature, Harry made it mockingly flicker its tongue at the Riddle. When it responded, he couldn't stop the feral grin from appearing on his face.

The beast was under his control and would obey his every whim. Now what could he do? Anything, actually, he realized with a burst of... some emotion he couldn't quite identify. He could have it dance, like he could have it roll around in the pools... yet no matter how amusing that would be, it wouldn't be very useful to him... He could have it try to attack Riddle... but Ginny...

Her fault

Hmm... Ginny had been stupid, hadn't she...? it was her fault she was down here, in some way... Therefore, if she died, it would be her fault and Riddle's, not his...

No blame... accident...

Right... they'd never blame him, no proof at all... Nobody would know he was the one...

<Except fe'ya, y'mean.>

His forehead suddenly gave a sharp burn and the idea vanished from his head, replaced by cold dread. What exactly had he been thinking? That he could simply attack Riddle, risk killing Ginny in the process and just walk away like that?

Savagely, thoughtlessly, he mentally barked his next order. His other half – The Basilisk, he reminded himself forcefully – suddenly flailed about, coiling most of its body to get ready to lunge... and did so directly against the left side wall.

The impact was deafening and reverberated across the room. The walls trembled, the floor shook and flecks of dust fell from the roof, staining the otherwise flawlessly clean tiles. Harry felt an instant of pain and reflexively pushed the source away, cutting the spell.

For a second, he feared that the Basilisk would simply shake its head and continue its attack, but when it tilted to the side, giving the impression of a massive, reptilian tree being cut, Harry almost grinned victoriously. Had he managed to knock it out?

With no noise of its own, the enormous snake fell in the water pool, causing a loud splash and a wave of water to splash over the walkway, and Harry. For a few seconds, both boys stared at the fallen Basilisk in disbelief, at the growing patch of red staining the crystal clear water and at the blood escaping through the broken scales on top of its head, where hints of red-stained white bones poked out. Harry had, indirectly, cracked its skull.

"You... You..." Tom stuttered, staring at the snake in disbelief.
"You've killed it... The legacy of Slytherin..."

Harry did not reply, instead concentrating on slowing his heart down. Tom's words were true, though... he had done it.

He, Harry Potter, twelve years old, had defeated the monster of Slytherin. He, in two spells, had killed a Basilisk. He felt a pang of pride at it...

...and of pity at the fallen monster. He had to admit that, if things had been different, he would have admitted the Basilisk to being a beautiful creature, although a bit... umm... murderous? Yes, that description fit it quite well.

'Note to self, stop spending time around Hagrid.' He mused, before turning to Tom.

"You lost, Riddle." He said, grinning ferociously. "Let Ginny go."

Tom gave him a sharp glare. "Where did you learn that spell, Potter?"

"Does it matter?" Harry retorted tauntingly, using the same words he had used in their first conversation.

"Of course it does," Riddle replied with a cunning sneer, "knowledge is power, after all... and power is life."

Perhaps the aim had been to destabilize the younger boy, or to satisfy a suspicion. Perhaps the words had simply been said as a hard earned lesson of life on his part, but whatever his intentions were, Harry didn't manage to stop his startled surprise from appearing.

"So, you *do* have the lexicon," Riddle guessed with a smirk. "Interesting... I never actually finished my lessons, it's nice to know I'll be able to continue them once I get out of here..."

"You're not getting out." Harry replied flatly.

"Oh, believe me, I am... you see, Ginny here," He waved at the fallen shape sprawled near the feet of the statue of Lord Slytherin, "is dying, slowly."

"N...No..." Harry gasped in horror. He had assumed that, perhaps, she had been bait, that she was simply stunned... Not *dying*... she couldn't be...

"Oh, yes," Tom replied, grinning victoriously. "As we are speaking, her life is slowly draining away into me. And once it's complete, I'll have a new body, a new life, free from the confines of

that stupid diary, and I'll be able to enact my revenge, starting with you, then with the Mudbloods and their protectors—"

"Shut up... Shut up... just *SHUT UP!*" Harry roared in anger.
"STUPEFY!"

Another shot of red light flew out of his wand with perfect aim, directly at Riddle's throat. If it had connected, it would have probably picked him up and sent him against the wall, the back of his neck and head first. Unfortunately, as Riddle wasn't quite corporeal, the spell harmlessly passed through and hit the statue of Slytherin, once again, only leaving a burn mark instead of digging a crater as the previous attempt had done.

Tom gave a look at the burn, then at the crater and finally at the fallen Basilisk before turning back to Harry. "The only way you could stop me now is by destroying my power source..."

He clicked his fingers. As if on cue, Ginny groaned and slowly got up, her limbs shaking at the effort, her arm still clutching the diary.

"Y...You mean..."

"Her life, or both of yours, Potter. You choose."

Harry sneered, his forehead bursting in head and his wand growing cold in response to his anger. Ginny looked like she was ready to fall already – only Riddle's mental grip on her prevented her from falling to the floor. The arm holding the little black book trembled frightfully, as if it was protesting against holding something extremely heavy. She looked like the smallest impact could finish her off. She looked

Weak

weak... pathetically so. He felt that, even if he *did* manage to find a way to save her – somehow – she was

Doomed

doomed already and, therefore, it didn't matter if he found another way, since she wouldn't survive... it would be extremely

easy... a single stunning hex, or perhaps a laughing hex, to exhaust the rest of her energy...

Dark magic

Or maybe his dark spells? Yes... she wouldn't survive anything he knew, would she? And he'd get to feel strong again, too... He could already picture her body being flung away by a wave of magic flames... Oh, look, there was a nice, pointy shard of the wall, right at her feet... wasn't that convenient? He could just use the Imperius curse again to make her kill herself with it...

His forehead burst into an almost painful wave of fiery heat and, once more, he realized what he had been thinking.

He had actually *considered* killing Ginny.

Not just taking the risk of harming her, but of actually committing the murder of one of his friends.

And in creative ways, too.

Shuddering at himself, he forced his mind to concentrate on a way – *any* way – to stop Riddle, that did not involve–

The easy way

-the *wrong* way.

Standing at the other end of the room, Tom frowned at him, crossing his arms.

“Humph,” he snorted, “and here I thought you might actually have common sense. Well, I should have known better – you *have* befriended Mudbloods and Muggle-lovers, after all. A pity about Malfoy, though, I actually had high hopes for him... Well, no matter. Since you’re obviously not going to do anything, I guess I might as well kill you now.”

For an instant, Harry was pretty sure Riddle was joking. After all, he couldn’t even touch a wand, right? And his Basilisk had just died! So how could he hope to kill him?

"Avada Kedavra."

Yet when the soft, weak incantation from Ginny came to his ears, sending shivers of familiarity up his spine for a reason he ignored, he was startled enough to nearly be caught unprepared by the following blinding flash of green light. Quidditch instincts, drilled into him by Flint during the whole year, kicked in, causing him to quickly duck to the side, barely avoiding the almost gaseous beam of magic and fall on his left ribs, knocking the wind out of him. The spell impacted against the pillar behind him, barely leaving a sizzle. Whatever that spell was, it was pitifully weak.

Or perhaps it was because of Ginny.

The girl was barely standing, now. Her face was drenched with sweat, her knees holding each other in a strange arch-legged stance, her arms hanging limply at her sides, yet her fists were clenched, one around her wand, the other around the inconspicuous diary of Tom Riddle—

'...that's IT!' He gasped mentally, clenching his wand tighter in his fist.

The diary – it held Riddle's spirit, which was slowly sucking Ginny's life away. Therefore, since he could not attack Riddle and didn't dare attack Ginny, he only had one target. The blasted book that had started it all.

Yet how could he get it out of her grip? Riddle would not let her simply hand it over, and would probably use all of her remaining strength to make her hold it; if he tried to wrestle it away, he could harm her. Stunning or body-binding her was out of question as well, for the same reason. He needed a weak spell, strong enough to make her drop it, and confined enough not to hurt her.

And he found one, after an instant of racking his memories.

"Dextera Mortis!!"

He felt his magic being sucked away by the tiring 'hand and wrist bind' hex. That meant that he was almost out of strength

himself. Already, he could feel the strange, detached feeling of magical exhaustion pass over him, distracting and weakening his thoughts.

...he couldn't help but feel like a lot *more* of what was necessary had been taken away, though.

Yet his aim was true. The girl's limp arm gave a shudder as the localized jinx impacted directly against her thumb. Her hand went numb and the book fell to the floor.

"NO!" Riddle gasped, guessing what he wanted to do. "Y- You can't—"

"Get stuffed, Riddle!" Harry yelled back, lifting his wand. His opponent's distress was a good sign.

He did not notice the other boy grin victoriously as he aimed at the diary.

Without quite realizing it, Harry thought of Blaise and Hermione, motionlessly waiting in the infirmary for the potion that would bring them back to life, and felt his forehead burst into heat before he cast his spell:

"*Geistötend Zauber!*"

And Riddle's face went from bearing a victorious grin to a horrified, panicked stare as the purple beam of magical light impacted against his diary. For an instant, the black leather glowed a dark crimson color and shook violently, as if it was trying to absorb the spell.

The glow intensified, along with a loud electric-like buzz as the book shook more and more strongly. And then, a tentacle-like, ethereal dark purple shadow came out of the diary, slowly edging toward Riddle, as if trying to ensnare him away. The ghostly boy tried to back away, yet his back hit an invisible barrier when he reached his maximum distance from the diary.

It did not help.

"ARGHHHH!!!!"

As soon as the tentacle reached him, the other boy burst into horrible, agonizing screams as his shape convulsed, like images on a bad TV. Harry blocked his ears with his hands, wincing in pain as a headache ripped his head in half. Finally, it was over. Riddle flickered one last time, gave a final furious and vengeful look at Harry before disappearing in a *pop* that, had he simply assisted the scene from outside the chamber, he would have called anticlimactic, if not ridiculous.

For a few seconds, Harry stood there, in the middle of the walkway, his robes drenched, his glasses almost useless from all the water on them, his skin sticky with cold sweat, his wand slowly warming back to room temperature, his body's aches and pains returning as adrenaline stopped flowing in his veins, staring at where Riddle had been in complete disbelief.

Was it over? Had he, a mere twelve years old boy, faced against Riddle, also known as the dark lord Voldemort, and the dreaded king of serpents and monster of Slytherin, a Basilisk, and actually *managed to win*?

He felt a strange urge to fall into giddy laughter.

‘Sucks to be you, Voldemort... that’s three times I beat you, and I’m in second year. Better luck next time...’ He thought numbly through the strange sensations caused by the magical exhaustion suddenly taking its toll on him, thanks to the vanishing adrenaline. He would normally *not* have wished good luck to someone out to kill him.

“oww... what hit me...?” Ron’s voice came from the left pool, somewhere behind him. The boy had apparently just woken up.

“Are you feeling all right?” Harry asked.

“Yeah, sure... as soon as Hagrid stops stomping on my head...” The red-head replied, rubbing his right temples before shooting him a glance. “Why is it that *every time* I follow you on your crazy schemes, I always end up getting bludgeoned?”

“Karma?” Harry supposed with a snigger. He would have laughed, but his head rung oddly whenever he talked. Kinda like

someone had replaced his brain for a bunch of bells... maybe he was going... *Bongers*? Was that a word?

"Well, whatever I did, it *has* to be pretty bad..." The taller boy said, before getting up and looking around the room; he saw the crater in Lord Slytherin's statue's kneecap, the cracked pillar, the fissured wall, the fallen Basilisk bathing in its own blood, and finally the numerous spell burns around the room. With an impressed whistle, he turned toward the smaller boy.

"Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"Next time I'm about to get you hacked off at me, hit me."

Snorting, Harry nodded. "Promise."

Oooh, maybe he shouldn't have nodded like that... the whole room suddenly seemed less solidly attached to the earth, which was an impressive feat for something built underground... Now, if only the floor would stop trying to do the Macarena...

...oh, wait, floors don't move, do they...?

Oh, look at the pretty snitches...

And Harry fell to the floor in an exhausted faint, just as a group of adults walked in through the doors, led by a boy with flashy blonde hair holding a black and red snake...

"The same as last time, Lucius," Said Dumbledore. "But this time, Lord Voldemort acted through someone else. By the means of this diary."

Albus Dumbledore, Harry Potter et la chambre des secrets,
Page 354.

Chapter 25: The Aftermath

Two tall yew trees arched over the entrance of the garden. Lush green grass, so full of life, lied about the content of the earth it grew on. Clear water flowed down an artificial river to a man-made pond in the center of the open area. A ring of stones lay around it, silent and still forever, just as what they represented for those whose names were carved into them.

Just as she had done uncountable times before, the woman silently strode between the trees, her shoe-clad feet crushing the grass as she went, and kneeled down in front of one of the stones, which already bore dried, dead flowers on top.

For a long time, she did not make a sound. The birds' cheerful singing seemed to fade away, replaced by the soft, long sound of leaves ruffled by a lazy breeze, and the soft trickling of the slowly flowing water. Clouds passed over the sun and went away, throwing cool shadows down on the stones.

"I'm sorry." She finally uttered, before getting up and leaving.

On top of the stone, a new flower had been placed on top of the dead ones, soon to join them.

And carved into the stone, a name and years were written, as still and as dead as whoever lay in the tomb beneath:

Clarissa Noire

1963-1981

~~~

Harry Potter woke up.

This was strange in itself, considering he didn't even remember going to sleep.

The only times this happened, as far as he remembered, was whenever he risked his life for a reason or another. Although this time, he knew there had been no Quidditch matches, nor had there been dragons, trolls or three-headed dogs involved this time.

Just a great bloody snake with killer-eyes-that-couldn't-seem-to-kill-him. And Voldemort. Can't forget him, can we. Only, it was a Voldemort before the whole permanent red eye and Marilyn Manson face tint thing happened. And who called himself *Tom*. And who had a middle name to scare off more people than his self-given nickname.

Come on, just imagine this: Here's the evil dark lord, Marvolo.

Yup, scary.

Whoever he had been named after, Harry didn't want to meet him (or her).

It took him a few minutes to see through his strange but quite distracting exhaustion-induced delirium. When he did, though, he decided he needed to figure out where he was. With all he knew,

he could still be in the chamber of secrets and he wouldn't have noticed.

With extreme effort, he forced his eyes open. The white ceiling of the infirmary room, bathed in the darkness of the night, assaulted his vision. The flickering light of the torches seemed to pierce and twist spears in his eye sockets, even though he perfectly knew they were barely bright enough to allow one to see shadowy shapes. With a bit less difficulty, he moved his arm to block out the light, wincing in pain.

"Awake, I see."

Dumbledore's voice came so suddenly that Harry nearly shrieked in surprise. The old man was sitting on the bedside chair at his left, though most of his shape was hidden by darkness. The boy could have sworn his blue eyes were shining, although they looked unusually grave. The pleasant twinkle was gone, as well.

"P-Professor Dumbledore, er..." Harry stuttered, not quite knowing what to say. "When did you come back?"

"Some hours ago, after news of what happened reached me. Not even Lucius found a way to hold me back... but enough about me. How do you feel, Harry?"

Harry blinked, assessing the question. Except for the fact that someone had apparently replaced his bones with lead, he felt fine. No pain at all, which was surprising – he had expected at least a headache.

"Fine," He replied truthfully. "Just a bit tired."

The old man's lips curled in a smile. "Understandable."

"Why do I feel so tired... I didn't..." He paused an instant to yawn impressively, barely managing to put a hand in front of his mouth, before continuing "...cast anything all that hard... sorry about that..."

"Forgiven," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling in amusement for a bare instant. "The reason why is simple: Thinking

books like these are created by the sacrifice and absorption of a part of one's magical essence and spirit. Normally, after being infused, the books are shut and cannot absorb anymore magic.

"However, it was very easy for Tom to unseal it so the diary, and in turn, he, would become more powerful, by absorbing *your* strength when your spell hit it." He gave a grin and chuckled, continuing: "I don't know what spell you have cast on it, but you seem to have given it an indigestion."

An amusing image of the little black book spewing its ink out in a toilet came to his mind. He barely resisted snorting.

"Now, Harry," Dumbledore continued, the mirth disappearing from his face. "Would you mind telling me exactly what happened in the chamber? We found the Basilisk in a pitiful shape, the diary of Tom Riddle in a worse one, and you and Miss Weasley taking a bare-stone mid-afternoon nap."

"Er..." 'I used a dark magic spell to make the basilisk smash its own skull and another one to banish Tom from the diary.' He thought wryly. 'If I tell him that, I'm pretty sure he'll want to lock me up.' "I... I can't remember." He lied, cursing himself for sounding so unbelievable.

"You told me you did not cast anything exhausting. That must mean you remember *something*." The old man pushed, his face furrowing in a frown.

Cursing himself and the old man for his observation skills, he quickly tried to find a way to cover his slip-up.

"I know I didn't... because... I don't know any really tiring spells!" He replied before mentally berating himself again. His enthusiasm at finding out a believable lie had seeped through his voice; if Dumbledore didn't see through it, he'd eat Crabbe's shirt.

For an instant, Dumbledore stared directly into his eyes. Harry was careful not to blink and not to look deceitful. When the old man turned away, there was no twinkle in his eyes. The boy felt like he had just had his mind read, but then pushed the thought aside as ridiculous.

"Well then, in that case, I recommend you stay in bed until Poppy lets you go, which may very well take a few weeks," the playful twinkle returned with a vengeance as Harry groaned in annoyance. "And I believe your friends will be delighted to know you're awake once again."

"How long was I out?" Harry asked.

"You've been in here for a day, now. Miss Weasley woke up some time before you, but she's been given dreamless sleep potion. I'm afraid she'll need some time to cope."

"Cope?" Harry wanted to sit up, but since his bones protested, he didn't manage to do more than weakly twitch his legs. "What's wrong with her?"

"I'm afraid she's taking the responsibility of the attacks quite personally." Dumbledore replied with a sigh, moving a bit to allow Harry to see the girl, laying in the neighboring bed at his left. He could see her face, eyes shut in deep sleep with nothing on her face to show any emotions at all.

"It wasn't her, sir, Riddle—"

"I am well aware of this. Ginny told me everything herself, and it stands with Tom Riddle's, or Voldemort's, usual methods."

Harry nodded in relief. "So she's..."

"She will not have to join Hagrid and care to the grounds." Dumbledore replied.

For the next few seconds, there was silence. Only the mild crackling of the burning torches prevented it from becoming oppressing. Dumbledore stared at him, as if to ask him if he had any questions. And Harry did.

"Riddle wanted me to attack Ginny." He remembered. "Why?"

"I suppose cursing her would have had the same effect as attacking the diary," Dumbledore guessed pensively. "Or, perhaps, it would have simply sped the process. I'm afraid life magic like this

is not my strong point, and, unfortunately, Riddle took his secrets and reasons to the grave with him.”

The boy nodded, sighed and relaxed his head, allowing it to roll on the pillow and letting him stare in the opposite direction for an instant...

...only to spot an occupied bed, on which a thoroughly bound figure was weakly struggling against the dozens of large, leather or rubber –Harry fancied he saw metal– belts holding whoever he was tightly down onto the bed. Scattered around the bed were large leather cases, open for all to see and revealing many pairs of lacy *female* underwear that Harry *hoped* were not of the man’s normal wardrobe, and many pairs of colorful robes he recognized as Lockhart’s were floating in the air, drawing the message: “All hail Gilderoy Lockhart: The PRAT ‘teacher’”.

Harry barely resisted bursting out into laughter as he recognized the muffled voice of Gilderoy Lockhart, seeping through the large conveyor belt – with a humorous caricature drawn where the imprint of the man’s face was visible – blocking his face. “Who...”

“I believe Mrs. Zabini did not expect to see her daughter’s Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher trying to escape the school just after she got the news of the latest attack. Most unfortunately for him, she is the one who caught him. Mister Malfoy had the idea for the banderole, however.”

Harry nearly burst out laughing again, but stopped a second later. “Mrs. Zabini is *here*?!”

Dumbledore nodded. “In this very room,” he said as he pointed at Blaise’s bed. Mrs. Zabini was sleeping soundly, her arms sprawled across the bed, her head lying on her daughter’s rigid lap. “She categorically refused to leave Miss Zabini’s side.”

“How...” Harry began again, but Dumbledore, once more, interrupted him.

"How did she know you were in danger? She didn't." At his confused face, he continued. "She has placed danger-detecting charms on those custom-made wand holsters she gave you for Christmas. If, ever, one of you two is in danger, she is warned immediately. Not of your location, though – that could not be done on an object as small as this." He gestured to the holster lying on his bedside table, with his wand safely tucked in place.

Harry nodded. It made sense; she must have been warned as soon as Blaise had been attacked. Giving a look at Lockhart, he couldn't help but think her timing had been just right. Only one little thing bothered him.

"Is that," He pointed at the belts holding Lockhart in place, "*all* she did?"

Dumbledore smiled. "Yes, it *does* seem rather mild, doesn't it?"

Harry nodded. The woman had gotten herself completely plastered in front of her daughter, in the house of people she had just met, for Merlin's sake! He *knew* she simply wouldn't satisfy her anger at his cowardice simply by tying him up, as exemplary as her technique had been.

"Actually, when she and Hagrid brought him here," Dumbledore continued, "he was shaped a bit like one of those Muggle crisppers... er... Pratz... no, Pretzels, I believe."

Harry blinked. "You mean..." He imagined how it must have looked and burst out laughing, ignoring the muffled protests of the blonde man tied up a few beds away.

Sobering up, he couldn't help but wonder about something, and asked his headmaster: "There's a spell that does that?"

It would fit just nicely in his arsenal; that spell, coupled with the dancing jinx... He couldn't help a snigger at the thought.

"To my knowledge, no." Dumbledore replied, eyes twinkling mischievously. "She always *did* prefer using the good old fashioned way."

Picturing Lockhart, trying to surrender while the fun-loving woman sat on the small of his back, grinning and twisting his legs around, sent Harry into another burst of mirthful laughs.

After a few seconds, he calmed down, though he could still feel his cheeks tugging at his lips. Soon, though, he relaxed and turned his attention to the old man.

Giving Harry a warm smile, Dumbledore got up.

"Now then, I believe I'll let you sleep, before Poppy decides that my skin would make a lovely welcome mat."

And, with that, the smiling old man left the room. As soon as he walked out, however, his smile disappeared.

\*\*\*

Step 72: Two drops of armadillo bile, stir twice counter clockwise...

Severus Snape was not a man who made friends easily. Snappy, sarcastic and a tad antisocial – ok, make that a *lot* – he also tended to be secretive and resented to anyone stepping on what he considered was his personal space. He was a remarkable potion master, however, capable of brewing some of the most difficult potions known to man, and some who left even a man with a patience of steel and a sense of order worthy of a computer crying in frustration.

Step 73: Wait five and a half seconds, add three cubes of Asphodel roots cut in step 15...

Because, when it came to potions, Severus Snape had nothing to envy of computers, and his patience was made of diamond. When it came to potions, Severus Snape's devotion to his cauldron tended to hover around an obsession.

Step 74: \*critical\* Add *only* one (1) drop of basilisk blood. Counter: a pinch of unicorn fur for each superfluous drop, start over.

However, when Severus Snape was in this state, he had the temper of a wildcat and the social skills of a tree. And even then, some trees could claim to have better social skills, such as, for example, the Whomping Willow. Some would argue that was his normal state; the reason why was simple: during most of his classes, he had a potion bubbling somewhere.

Hence why, when Dumbledore burst into the room, causing the drop of exceedingly rare, freshly extracted ingredient to be joined by at least six others, he reacted in a disrespectful way that normally would have left him appalled.

“Merlin’s hairy balls, Dumbledore!” He cursed, emptying his vial of unicorn fur in the dangerously bubbling mixture, causing it to calm down like a baby given a pacifier. “Ever heard of *knocking*?!”

The old man raised an eyebrow. “Turnabout is fair play, Severus. Besides, I would rather you wait until summer to try out extremely volatile potions with those Basilisk extract you picked up.”

Then, with an irritatingly pleasant smile, Dumbledore mischievously added a frustrating: “And I don’t think the enchanter would be... enchanted to hear you speak so of his family jewels, pardon the pun.”

With a scowl that clearly showed how pardoned the old man was, Severus sighed as he spilled the wasted potion into a sink. “Is there any reason why you decided to bother me at...” a furtive look at the clock, “one in the morning? I could have been sleeping.”

“You *should* have been sleeping.” Dumbledore chastised, still smiling. “And the reason why I’m here is that Harry is your responsibility.”

“Oh, no, not the ‘You are being far too irresponsible for a man of your position, how dare you let Potter go by himself’ rant again... McGonagall ran me through it twice already, even though

I'm sure she would have done no better herself. Besides, I can hardly be blamed for the fact that he has the common sense of a lemming—”

“He’s awake.” Dumbledore interrupted.

“Oh,” The younger man paused for an instant. “Is there any reason why you decided to inform me now?”

There was no smile this time. “I have good suspicions that Harry has been learning the dark arts.”

Snape froze. The cauldron slipped from his fingers and fell in the bottomless pit, only to appear on his desk a second later, perfectly clean.

His voice slow and calm, a sure sign of dismay to those who knew how to read him, Snape asked: “He has... what?”

“He has been learning dark magic.” Dumbledore repeated gravely.

“How do you know?”

“You know how I know.”

Snape sighed and shot him a glare. “One day, you’re going to have to learn to stop reading through people’s minds like open books. It’s extremely irritating and impolite, not to mention invasive.”

He sat on his chair and took a look inside the cauldron, before frowning, getting up, walking to the sink and kicking its side impatiently. A metal stirring spoon shot out and was swiftly picked up in mid-air.

“Nevertheless,” he continued gravely, returning to his seat, “if what you’re saying is true, then...” he had no idea how to finish that line. The mere thought of Harry Potter, the boy-who-lived, the son of Lily Evans, becoming a dark wizard was simply preposterous, and took him completely by surprise. “How far along is he?” He finally asked.

"I have no idea, but he has been touched already."

The black-haired wizard's eyes widened. The touch of dark magic was like a stain to the soul, slowly corrupting the thoughts of its victim, until he or she could only use the dark side. And at that point, no other thoughts but bad feelings could come to the new dark wizard. Very few became totally corrupted, always keeping a touch of positive emotions in them... and, like a stealthy cobra, the victim *never* noticed the touch until it was too late.

Snape said some choice swear words. Dumbledore's eyes widened in surprise.

"I retract what I said about Merlin. Zeus' entire family tree must be rolling in their tombs."

Ignoring the jest, Snape decided: "I'll tell him to stop—"

"If there is one thing Mister Potter takes from both his parents, it's his stubbornness." Dumbledore interrupted. "In fact, I believe he has the compilation of both of them. If you tell him to stop, he will simply ignore you and keep learning."

"He's my student. I know him better— He...He'll listen to reason, once I tell him about the tou—"

"He is not Lily." Snape flinched at the hard interruption. "You cannot gauge his reactions simply on what she would have done. He acts a lot like her, yes, but he has his father's impulsivity."

Snape growled, mumbled another curse involving the wretched Potter blood and glared at the old man. "What do you suggest?"

Dumbledore sighed and rubbed his temples tiredly. "Let him continue – at this point, it's too late to do anything. Besides, any additional weapon he can get to defend himself against Voldemort will be welcome. Watch him carefully and guide him to the best of your ability – if anyone can do it, it's you."

Spluttering, Severus got up and protested, "I couldn't even do it for myself, Headmaster, I can't..."

Dumbledore lifted a hand and interrupted him. This time, there was no retorting or protesting to the old man's tone of voice. "If anyone can help Mister Potter and stop him from turning against the light, it is you, Severus Snape."

With that, he got up and swept out of the room. Snape spent a few seconds staring at the shut door before he burst into more cursing.

Sometimes, he hated his job.

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Harry was dancing around a beautiful dirt path zigzagging across an endless green field full of wild flowers and fluffy bunnies. Golden-leaved trees were growing along the path, throwing interesting shadows shaped like smiley faces on the beaten earth. Chocolate fountains lined the way, sending sweet smells all over the lands.

A strange-looking, handbag-carrying purple creature with a television screen on its stomach was heading toward him, its wide open arms inviting him in a welcoming hug. Taking a moment to pick up a BFG9000 that just happened to be lying there, on the side of the path, he sent the creature on a viridian one-way trip to oblivion. All was right once again. He found himself smiling as he walked by the smoking ashes of the... whatever that thing had been.

Saying hello to a skipping little girl carrying a cute, pink staff ending with a heart-shaped crystal, with long blue-green hair set in two ponytails held by little lilies, then nodding at the strange-looking brown furred creature that was following the girl and looked like a cross between a rabbit and a cat, he continued on his way, until he saw the trail end.

And then, he saw his mother, standing with Mrs. Zabini at her side, and two other blurry, black shapes behind her. The Italian

woman smiled at him and opened her arms to welcome him. Her mouth opened and she spoke:

"WAKE UP!!"

The extremely loud bellow startled Harry out of his dream, causing him to sit up. Or at least, he would have, had the face of Ronald Weasley not been in the way. As their skulls impacted with a loud, bony 'clunk', he heard the unmistakable sniggering laugh of Draco Malfoy from his left, where he was sitting on the bedside chair.

Rubbing his smarting forehead and ignoring Ron's description of him as a certifiable illegitimate son of a dyslexic orangutan with a Bludger instead of a head, Harry shot an angry glare at his other friend.

"Do you mind, some people are trying to *sleep*."

"You've been sleeping for a day and a half, you lazy git," Draco retorted. "Even sleeping beauty there," he pointed at Ron with a lazy wave of his thumb, "never slept that long."

"What's this fascination with me getting clobbered...?" Ron wondered to himself while wincing at the pain on his forehead, before giving Draco a glare. "And I'm not interested, Malfoy."

"I was being sarcastic, Weasley. Don't flatter yourself." Draco snapped back.

"Thank you, Malfoy, you have no idea how reassured I am," the other boy retorted.

Chuckling at their antics, Harry gave a look at Lockhart; he was still there, still tied up, though he wasn't moving. The banderole was now decorated with the female undergarments, which surrounded the letters in multicolored silk or cotton clouds.

Mrs. Zabini was gone; the chair was still there and one could practically tell what the position of her body had been, just by seeing the folds in the blankets on top of Blaise's still form.

As for Ginny, she was fast asleep, curled up under the blankets of her infirmary bed.

"So, Ron, have you apologized yet?" Harry asked, pointing his thumb at Ginny.

"Er... no, I haven't had the time..." The red-head replied, his ears burning red in shame. "Madam Pomfrey said she woke up and told everything that happened, but then she had to get stuffed with dreamless sleep potion, so..."

"What an eloquent choice of words, Weasley." Draco drawled. "'Stuffed'. Clearly I underestimated your poetic talen—"

"Oh, shut your gob already." Ron snapped.

"Both of you, be *quiet*." Pomfrey snapped as she approached them briskly. "This is an infirmary, not a social gathering. With all that ruckus you made, I'm surprised you have not woken the victims yet!"

Ignoring his friends' current situation, Harry looked around the room.

It seemed Draco and Ron were the only people there, along with the victims, still lying in the beds in exactly the same way as before, Madam Pomfrey – who was now comparing Draco to a very loud peacock, causing the blonde boy to huff indignantly – Lockhart and Ginny, who...

...was staring at him. As soon as she noticed he was looking at her, however, she closed her eyes and feigned being asleep, though the effect was ruined by the subtle pinkish tinge in her ears.

Reassured, Harry smiled. She was all right. Dumbledore had told him so yesterday, but to be told and to see so were totally different things. Seeing Ron was in the room, and since he wanted to apologize, Harry took a quick decision:

"Good morning, Ginny," he said.

Both boys turned toward him before looking at Ginny, whose ears had taken an interesting shade of crimson as she still attempted to fake sleeping.

"Ginny?" Ron asked, walking around Harry's bed to go to her bedside. "Are you up?"

"No, Weasley. That position is called lying do—"

"Shut up." Ron sharply interrupted the other boy's drawl. Draco's mouth obeyed to the red-head's order with a painful-sounding clack.

With a few long-legged strides, Ron went to his sister's bedside. Ginny had apparently given up pretending to sleep and was now sitting up and looking directly in her brother's eyes.

"Er... Ginn...sis, er..." Ron began clumsily and Harry barely resisted a sigh. The typical Gryffindor bashfulness was at work once again. "Hermione asked... er... I mean... I wanted to... er... tell you... um... so... something."

With one hand, Harry quickly blocked Draco's mouth before the boy drawled something that would complicate things further. The smaller boy retaliated with a sour glare at having his favorite sport, Weasley-baiting, interrupted.

"Well, I'm listening," Ginny said, her voice cold, although Harry could see mirth glittering in her eyes.

"Uh, yeah, good... er..." Ron verbally stumbled, his hand scratching the back of his head nervously. Finally, he seemed to give up giving a speech and simply squeaked a quick: "Sorry!"

Ginny blinked theatrically, before frowning in fake confusion. "What did you say?"

"I said I'm sorry," Ron repeated more forcefully.

Pulling her body straighter, the girl shot her brother an angry glare as she drew a loud breath. "Ronald Brian Weasley," she began, her voice sounding a lot like a higher-pitched version of her mother's. "You have been an awful git to me all year long. You've

ignored me when I needed help. You've disowned me and pushed me away like a stranger. Not only that, but you've also alienated Harry and Blaise, and you've been making Hermione angry. And now, you ask me to forgive you by saying 'Sorry'?"

"What should I do, then?" Ron asked.

'Hook, line and sinker,' Harry chuckled mentally.

Just as he had thought, he saw a victorious glimmer appear in the girl's eyes as she replied: "First, swear that you'll never push one of your or my friends – or family members – away simply because of their house placement."

Ron's head turned in Harry's direction and his eyes flickered to the black-haired boy's for a second, before looking back at Ginny.

"Fine."

"Swear." The girl growled.

With a dejected sigh, Ron said, "I swear."

"Then, swear that you'll apologize to Hermione and knock some sense into Percy."

"I swear." There was no hesitation in his voice; apparently Ron had intended to do the same.

"And finally," Ginny stretched the word teasingly, "Apologize to Harry, Blaise and Draco – yes, him too! And it's your job to tell mum what happened!"

"G-Ginny!!" Ron whined. Although whether it was because he didn't want to apologize to them or because he didn't want to face his parents about this, Harry didn't know.

The girl huffed and looked away from him. "Fine, then. Say hi to my brothers, Fred and George... do you know them?"

"Fine, I swear." Ron sighed miserably.

With a sunny grin replacing the falsely-gloomy expression she had had a few seconds ago, Ginny twisted around and ensnared her startled brother in a tight hug. After a few seconds, a loud sniff was heard.

"Er... Ginny? Are you ok?" Ron asked.

Harry did not manage to understand the mumbled reply – had she said "sorry"? – but he did see the girl's fists clenched against the fabric on the back of Ron's uniform twitching and trembling with silent sobs. For a few moments, Harry wondered if she was all right, but she soon released her brother and he managed to see her face; her smile had dimmed somewhat, but was still present, as if she was trying to decide between being sad and being happy.

Deciding that this had now become none of his business, Harry turned to Draco, who was looking at the two with an odd look on his face. Noticing the black-haired boy's attention, Draco smirked.

"The hero saves the damsel in distress, and everything is right once again..." He drawled, quite loudly to be heard by the two Weasleys, "but isn't *the hero* supposed to get the girl in the end? Besides, in case you don't know, incest is illegal down to first cousins."

"Shut up Malfoy!" Both red-heads snapped, their faces equally crimson.

In the end, Ron *did* apologize to them, and while Harry took it in stride, Draco spent a few minutes – ok, make that hours – rubbing the red-head's nose in the dirt. By the next morning, all three had taken strict resolutions: Ron would never apologize to Malfoy ever again, Harry would never let Ron apologize to Draco ever again, and Draco decided that being apologized to was really not all that bad after all.

Xu and Emma visited often, along with Draco and Ron – never together, though. Both Slytherins were quite grateful for the break of monotony they brought; Pomfrey, as good a matron as she was, certainly was not the best conversationalist, and apparently didn't care at all for any event or rumor going about the school. Emma, on the other hand, seemed to be fascinated with knowing everything that was going on, and gladly informed them both every time, for example, a funny class accident happened. Quite often, her words started with: "Do you know what Longbottom did yesterday?"

Harry did not see Mrs. Zabini again. Queries to Madam Pomfrey told him she had left back to her house in Little Whinging, as her husband had been worried enough to risk the Floo network to call Dumbledore; the Muggle man had been apparently apprehensive to voluntarily putting his head in a fire, green or not.

For the next few days, Harry and Ginny's life was one mostly of silence, of watching madam Pomfrey work around the infirmary, and of small, dispersed and crimson conversations. Crimson due to Ginny's face, of course; it seemed saving her life had, if anything, made her crush grow to the point that she could hardly tell him three words in a row without having her cheeks burn.

It was not until the next Wednesday that madam Pomfrey finally consented to let him leave the infirmary. Ginny, much to her displeasure, was not fit enough to get up yet, even though she felt fine. The matron had apparently decided that there was "no way anyone can fall under a total possession for a month and come out completely unscathed, much less an eleven years old girl!"

To ease her discomfort, Harry made sure he visited as often as he could. She didn't say or do much while he was there, but he knew she liked it, and not just because of her crush – he hoped.

Upon entering the great hall, Harry had gotten the honor of an ovation, much to his embarrassment. Everyone in the other houses cheered, and many Slytherins did also. However, he had

seen one or two sour faces – blood purists, who had hoped the heir would finish his job, without harming any other Slytherins.

The ratios turned around when Dumbledore declared that, for “helping those in need and for having kept a cool head in the face of danger”, Harry was to be awarded one hundred points for Slytherin. Harry soon lost track of the number of back taps he received, and didn’t *dare* look at the murderous glares dominating the other tables.

A little detail nagged at his mind, however; he hadn’t told Dumbledore about what happened, yet the old man seemed to know how he had acted. How strange... Did Ginny remember everything that had happened?

No. She would have acted *at least* a little differently after seeing him defeat the Basilisk with the Imperius curse – perhaps feared him a bit.

Perhaps Dumbledore really *was* a mind reader?

...

...Naa. He must have been guessing.

\*\*\*

Classes started anew for Harry. Defense Against the Dark Arts lessons were cancelled, seeing as Lockhart was “unreachable”. Nobody seemed to be aware that he was simply lying on a bed – not that he could do anything else – in the infirmary. Transfiguration lessons seemed unbearable, suddenly; the fact that, because of him, Slytherin would win the house cup with over one hundred and fifty points, seemed to make the teacher very sour and hacked at him.

Likewise, Herbology classes were hectic; the Mandrakes were almost mature, and once or twice every class, a pair of them had to be pulled out from behind bushes or other plants –

sometimes quite risky ones – and replanted. It came to the point that Draco had dubbed the classes: “Herb-chaperoning”

Potions, which had become one of Harry’s favorite classes over the year, suddenly took a turn for the... weird. Professor Snape was oddly subdued in classes, only once or twice giving in to his favorite hobby of Longbottom baiting. More than once, Harry caught the man staring at him, not with the barely concealed hatred he had been offered a year ago, but with a pensive, grim expression that left him nervous.

Quite honestly, he didn’t know which one he preferred.

A week and a half later, on Friday, Professor Sprout burst through the doors of the great hall, and announced that the mandrakes were ready to be used in the potion. Preparing the doses took a day and a half, during which all access to any hallways around Professor Snape’s classroom was forbidden, forcing many Slytherin to take long detours upon returning from classes.

On Sunday, Harry went to the infirmary, along with Draco and Ron. Most of the school’s staff was present when he entered, except for Professor Snape and madam Pomfrey herself.

He spotted Filch on the first try, looking at his cat with an expression not unlike one would a priceless and fragile work of art. Quite honestly, Harry felt like the only exhibition Mrs. Norris could fit – yet not welcomed – into would be a yard sale.

McGonagall was standing stoically, alternating between impatiently staring at the clock and looking out of the nearest window every few seconds.

Professor Flitwick was talking to Ginny, who had not noticed their presence yet; she was giggling at what the diminutive teacher had said, but he couldn’t tell what.

To his surprise, the Ravenclaw prefect who had slapped Percy, back in September, was there, cradling his glasses in her hands.

Harry nearly did a double-take when he saw Professor Sprout; her hands, normally encrusted with dirt were clean, and she did not wear the cheap, easily cleaned work clothes she usually did.

However, he *did* manage a double-take when he saw Mrs. Zabini, sitting at Blaise's bedside, once again.

"Mrs. Zabini?" He asked tentatively, scooting closer.

The woman gave Harry a small, strained smile. Her face was a bit weary, as if she had spent a good amount of time worrying. The boy almost didn't recognize her.

"Hey Harry," she said, nodding at him before turning back to Blaise, hiding her face from his view.

"Why are you here, er- I mean, not that you can't, but..." Harry stumbled for his words.

"I...I promised I'd be there for her."

Her voice was soft and sad, perhaps even wistful when she replied. Harry felt like he had stepped into something he had no place in, so he pushed down the question that was rising in his gut.

Soon after, Madam Pomfrey walked in, followed by a tray full of vials filled with an olive-colored potion and Professor Snape, who was pulling a floating and weightless cauldron behind him, bubbling with the same liquid. As if to test the potency of the potion, the matron spilled the first vial on top of Mrs. Norris' head.

The effect was immediate; the cat suddenly leaped in surprise, nervously looking everywhere, her drenched fur bristled in confusion, making her look like and oddly skinny and long-

legged hedgehog. Satisfied, Pomfrey continued on, after giving a nod at a smug-looking Snape.

One by one, the victims were re-awakened, while the Bloody Baron was pushed inside the cauldron by Professor Flitwick, using a large fan conjured by McGonagall.

Finch-Fletchley screamed in horror as soon as he started to move. It took him several minutes to calm down enough to realize he wasn't in the corridor anymore, and a few more to see that he wasn't dead.

Creevey's finger twitched on the trigger of his absent camera, before he blinked in confusion and sat up.

Weasley *tried* to ask "what the—" but the Ravenclaw Prefect threw herself at him and started crying and babbling incoherently. He looked both like Christmas had come early and like the entire world had decided to put on polka colors without warning him.

Hermione blinked in confusion and sat up immediately. "Am I dead?"

She didn't get her reply – instead, Ron hugged her so tightly she had to hit his back and ask to breathe.

Blaise was next. She twitched and her left hand closed on air. For a few seconds, she stared stupidly at where her wand was supposed to be, before she was almost swept off the bed by her mother's sudden hug.

"M-MOM!!" She whined. "Leggo!!"

"Didn't I tell you to be careful?" The woman admonished, not letting go, much to the girl's chagrin.

"We were, we used a mirror—Sir!" She seemed to remember why she was in the room and quickly turned toward Professor Snape. "The monster—it's a Basilisk! And Ginny's—" She spotted the younger girl, a few beds away, and faltered, "-here... oh."

Ginny's smile vanished, replaced by a sorrowful frown. Harry bit his lip. Uh ho.

"What *did* happen, anyway," the Bloody Baron, restored to his silvery bloodiness, asked. "The last thing I remember is turning around and seeing a huge snake..."

"The Basilisk and the heir have both been permanently dealt with." Professor Snape declared, giving a look at Harry.

Hermione gave a look at Ginny, who was now looking down at the floor. She opened her mouth to speak, but seemed to rethink her words and gave up, instead giving a thoughtful gaze at Harry.

"A pity," Mrs. Zabini growled while her hand clenched around her daughter's arm. "I wouldn't have said no to giving him a piece of my mind—"

"My, what a dreadful concept," came a voice Harry heard every week, but in a tone he hadn't heard in about a year: Severus Snape's sarcastic and disgusted tone. "I believe it is all for the best that he died, then; we wouldn't want another... *episode* from *you*, would we."

The woman froze. Her body spun around to face the black-haired professor, her eyes glittering in barely contained anger, as Harry had seen back in Flourish and Blot's.

"Snape." She hissed venomously.

"Zabini." He replied on the same tone, which was something considering how he much preferred acting calm and cool.

For a few tense moments, Harry was certain both of them were about to break in a wizard duel in the middle of the infirmary. Blaise seemed to think the same, although she was grinning in anticipation – seeing her mother in action *and* quite possibly seeing Snape getting his arse kicked was something that apparently had appeal to her.

Fortunately, they were interrupted.

"Now, now, children, not now," Dumbledore chastised calmly as he entered the room.

He wasn't alone.

"Mom? Dad?" Percy said, seeing his parents enter.

"Percy? What are you doing here?" Mr Weasley asked.

"Ginny!" Molly Weasley gasped as soon as she spotted her, bursting into a run from behind the old wizard to hug her only daughter tightly. "Thank goodness! We were so worried, the clock—"

Harry blinked. Clock? What clock?

Ah, right, the one in their living room, which indicated the status of everyone in the family. They had probably seen Ginny's switch to *Mortal danger*—

...but what about Percy? Mr Weasley apparently didn't know about the whole petrification thing, he seemed quite surprised to find his son in a bed.

And why hadn't they come as soon as they had seen it? Mrs. Zabini had charged in almost as soon as she had learned about Blaise, after all.

Professor Dumbledore cleared his throat, interrupting the witch and the now very embarrassed girl, and clapped his hands once. "Well then, how is everybody feeling?"

There was a half-hearted chorus of "I'm alright"s or similar phrases.

"Good, good. Minerva, Filius, Pomona, Severus, please escort your students back to their common rooms – except for misters Potter and Frederic, George, Percival and Ronald Weasley, and miss Weasley."

"I'll do it myself." Mrs. Zabini put in from Blaise's bedside, giving a glare at Snape, who glared back.

"Fine," Snape snapped, "it's not like I want to spend more time than I have to with your little brat."

Mrs. Zabini bristled, her fist clenching around her wand - which Harry could have sworn had seemed to just... *appear* there. Blaise's eyes narrowed and a low growl came from her throat. At that moment, nobody in the infirmary had any doubt that the woman was her mother: they were downright identical. Fortunately, Dumbledore stepped in again, reminding Professor Snape that he had a potion or another bubbling away in his quarters.

The next time the door of the infirmary closed, only Harry and the Weasleys were left, with Dumbledore and Pomfrey watching over them. For a few seconds afterwards, a dam of silence seemed to build, as everyone waited, staring at Percy – who had just gotten up from his bed – and Ginny – who had taken an interestingly pale shade of cherry.

Then, the dam burst.

Questions, sounds and words were sent suddenly, almost on common accord, by every red-head in the room, to every other. Harry blinked and tried to make sense of it, and apparently he wasn't the only one; Ginny quickly ducked under her blankets while Pomfrey clicked her tongue disapprovingly. Dumbledore merely sighed.

"One at a time, perhaps?" Dumbledore said, his calm voice somehow managing to be heard above the cacophony.

Seeing the Weasley children being sheepish was something Harry had seen once or twice. However, seeing the *elders* looking chastised was something else entirely.

'Right. Dumbledore must have been a teacher even way back then,' Harry supposed. Old habits die hard, after all.

There were a few more seconds of sheepish silence before Mr. Weasley decided to ask: "Er, Percy, why are you here?"

"W...W—I... er..."

“He was petrified,” Harry replied for him, earning a shocked look from both parents and from the victim himself.

“He was *what*!?”

“I was *what*!?”

“How come you didn’t know?” One of the twins asked his parents, giving them a look. “I mean, the clock—”

Harry absentmindedly nodded. He had been asking himself the same thing.

“The clock said he was “at school”, all the time, like the rest of you... must be broken—”

“No, I don’t think it was,” Dumbledore interrupted. “Your clock probably switched to mortal danger, for the few seconds when the attack took place, but once it was done, mister Weasley was not in danger, nor was he dead; the clock simply switched for the closest truth; that he was at school.”

Both twins went “oh”.

“Shouldn’t you have known when the clock had switched?” Harry asked.

Mrs. Weasley nodded with a frown. “We should have...”

“Unless... When did he get attacked, anyway?” Mr. Weasley asked.

“November seventh,” Dumbledore replied.

The two parents shared a look. “November... is it...?” The woman asked.

“Yeah,” Mr. Weasley sighed. “It was that day Amos got a raise and wanted to celebrate. We were at the Diggory’s all night long.”

Yes, that *would* prevent them from seeing the clock shift. Perhaps they just hadn’t seen Ginny’s, too--

"And what about Ginny? The clock went to mortal danger for almost four hours!" Mrs. Weasley asked, her hand finding Ginny's arm underneath the blanket.

"You saw that? How come you come here sooner?" Harry asked bluntly.

"We *would* have come here faster, but the guy in charge of the paperwork to allow us to come here took a sick leave for two weeks because he needed new glasses... something about a madwoman going ballistic, didn't catch her name..." Mr. Weasley trailed off, looking pensive.

"So, what happened to her?" Mrs. Weasley repeated her question in a hard tone.

"Ron, that's your call!" The twin that had yet to speak chirped with a cheerful grin. "Go ahead!"

"Don't forget, you swo~ore!" The other twin sang.

Ron's ears reddened as he suddenly found himself the center of attention. At that moment, he seemed to be berating himself for ever swearing to something like that.

"Ron, I can do it..." Ginny proposed, but her mouth suddenly found itself blocked by one of the twins' hands. "MPh!! Phhed!!"

"We're waiting, Ron!" 'Fred' cooed, grinning.

"Er... ok..." Ron took a deep breath and launched himself: "It started when Ginny got sorted."

Harry saw both parents' eyes go to the girl's house badge. Ginny's face, though half-hidden by her brother's hand, had clearly turned red again.

"Slytherin?" Mr. Weasley said, blinking.

"Oh." Mrs. Weasley simply said, turning toward Ron. "And?"

"W-Wh... but, I mean... you're not... surprised?!" The youngest boy stumbled.

"Oh, of course I am," the Weasley matriarch replied calmly. "But it's hardly the first time that happens."

"Right, my own great-grandmother had been a Slytherin." Mr. Weasley declared.

"She had been a Black, too." Mrs. Weasley reminded her husband.

"Hm... you're right." The man nodded, before turning to Ron. "And, what happened next?"

The next few minutes were *not* happy ones. As soon as they heard about what the boys had done, Mrs. Weasley's face took an interesting tint, probably called "irate red number 15" by cosmetic companies. Upon hearing what Percy had said, though, Harry felt pretty sure the woman would spontaneously combust.

Fifteen minutes of yelling later, Percy was sulking in the proverbial corner and Harry, once his ears had stopped ringing, wondered if, perhaps, Mrs. Weasley had a bit of banshee ancestry. Ron resumed his story on a much more nervous voice, skipping over his and Hermione's... 'disagreement' in the library, when she had slapped him... and taking a running leap over the whole Jusenkyo incident – much to the twins' disappointment.

"And Ginny didn't get *any* help from any of you for the whole year?!"

"She *did* have people to speak to," Dumbledore corrected, indicating Harry. "Mister Potter, Miss McKinnon, Miss Chang and Miss Zabini were most helpful, from what I heard."

Harry gave the old man a frowning look. 'From what I heard'?

...ah, right. Probably Professor Snape; it was his job, after all, to make sure the students in Slytherin were all right. He was probably spying on the whole situation.

"So, she went to you for comfort, hmm?" Mrs. Weasley asked, giving a pointed look at Harry; a look that held a dose of... motherly protectiveness to it. It felt a bit unnerving.

"Um..." Harry didn't quite know how to react and found himself taking a step back.

"Not quite, unfortunately." Professor Dumbledore rescued the grateful Slytherin boy, a grave air on his face. "Miss Weasley did not want to worry her friends, after all, so, at first, she went to Professor Snape. Isn't that right?"

Ginny nodded meekly, while the twins' mouths gaped in horror.

"Snape?!" "The bloo—"

"Hey!" Ginny snapped. "I'll have you know Professor Snape can be *very* nice when he wants to!"

"*When he wants to'* being the operative term, here." One of the twins said, the other agreeing with a silent, grave nod.

"If I may continue," Dumbledore cut in, eyes twinkling and letting the jab at one of his staff pass, "as I mentioned, *at first* she went to Professor Snape. And then, she found Tom."

"Tom?" Mr. Weasley repeated blankly. "Who...?"

"More precisely, it was the *memory* of Tom Marvolo Riddle, hidden in his diary."

From then on, Dumbledore took the conversation, explaining – from educated guesses, Harry could tell – what had happened. As he already knew all this, the Slytherin allowed himself to look about the room, at the reactions of those present.

Ron allowed himself a relieved sigh at having his part of the story finished and plopped down on the nearest seat he could find.

The twins were listening on each side of Ginny, their expressions devoid of their usual grins.

Percy was staring at his sister, as if not quite believing what had been going on.

Harry understood – to him, he had been waiting in front of the Ravenclaw common room to apologize to his girlfriend and the next thing he knew, he was in the infirmary(?) and she was crying on him(?!?) and telling him how glad she was that he was all right(Ok, who decided to put England on the south of the Earth this week?!).

As for the parents, they stared at Ginny, the woman with a wide-eyed, horrified stare, the man with a frown.

“Ginny, didn’t I teach you *anything*?!” He admonished. “Didn’t I always tell you *not* to trust something that can act and think by itself unless you can see where it keeps its brain! You should have showed that book to one of your Professors; it could only have been activated by dark magic!”

“B-But...” Ginny tried to defend herself, but Harry could see how this was messing her up pretty badly. No doubt that the last thing she wanted was to be reminded of her mistakes.

*“I’m afraid she’s taking the responsibility of the attacks quite personally.”*

Right. There was no way this could help. Quickly thinking of some way to distract them, he spoke:

“It wasn’t her fault things got so bad.”

“What do you mean?” Mrs. Weasley asked. Harry found himself on the receiving end of nine curious stares, including Pomfrey’s and Dumbledore’s.

Steeling himself, he continued, “I wrote in it once. If I had warned Professor Snape, he would have taken it away and—”

“And you wanted to catch the heir, even back then.” Dumbledore interrupted. “You believed Riddle knew who the heir was, thus, you wouldn’t have just handed it away.”

Harry froze. That was true. On hindsight, however, it was a pretty stupid move.

"And what happened next?" Mrs. Weasley asked Dumbledore. "Did Harry find Ginny, or..."

"Riddle took her down into the chamber..." And once again, the old man launched himself in the story, taking the children and the parent's attention. Harry spared a look at Ginny, who was smiling shyly at him. As soon as she noticed he was looking, though, she took an interesting color of red and looked away.

'She must be grateful that I tried to take some of the blame,' Harry hazarded a guess.

"You mean... Riddle was You-know-who?!" Ron gasped in horror, startling Harry into listening to Dumbledore again.

"Indeed." Dumbledore nodded. The other Weasleys were just as aghast as the youngest boy. "Very few people know that Lord Voldemort was once called Tom Riddle. I taught him myself, fifty years ago, at Hogwarts. He disappeared after leaving the school ... traveled far and wide ... sank so deeply into the Dark Arts, consortied with the very worst of our kind, underwent so many dangerous, magical transformations, that when he resurfaced as Lord Voldemort, he was barely recognizable. Hardly anyone connected Lord Voldemort with the clever, handsome boy who was once Head Boy here."

"I was in the same room as he was..." Ron mumbled, apparently in shock.

"I told all my secrets to You-Know-Who?!" Ginny nearly shrieked.

"I'm afraid so," Dumbledore replied to both of them.

"But he's gone, now." Harry quickly put in, seeing Ginny's stricken face. "The diary, I mean."

Percy seemed on the verge of starting to ramble. “B-But... er... she won’t be... y’know... punished? I mean, it wasn’t her fault—”

Dumbledore calmly interrupted him by lifting a hand.

“There will be no sanctions. Older and wiser magi have been fooled by Voldemort in the past.” Ignoring the cringes and winces from the red-heads, he continued, “now, Harry and I will leave you all to mingle; I believe you have a lot to tell each other.”

Gently, the old man tapped Harry’s shoulder, and the two walked out of the infirmary, leaving a reunited family to celebrate a happy ending.

"The same as last time, Lucius. But this time, Lord Voldemort acted through someone else... by the means of this diary."

Albus Dumbledore, Harry Potter et la chambre des secrets,  
Page 354.

## Epilogue

[Extract from Harry Potter's diary, June 1st 1993]

*I think Hermione has lost it. Why do I say that? (Except for the obvious and usual reasons, written about half a dozen million times in the past pages) Well, we (Draco, Blaise and I, that is) caught her in the Library, studying her brain out of her skull. Apparently, she hadn't heard that the exams were cancelled, so we told her... and she was disappointed, of all things! I mean, it's like her greatest joy in the world is to study – apart from trying to convert us into bookworms.*

*Should have been a Ravenclaw, that girl.*

[June 18th]

*COMPLETELY MENTAL. We just got the confirmation letters for the class choices we had done back in Easter. Hermione's is twice as long as all of ours. After Blaise asked (read: snitched it from her hand) we saw why; she decided she didn't want to make the choice between the classes, so and took all of them at the same time; even Muggle Studies, never mind the little insignificant fact that she's Muggle Born.*

*And she won't listen to reason, either. Even after Draco told her Arithmancy is hard enough to give headaches to anyone without a brain the size of a car (Anatomically impossible, but in her case, it would explain quite a few things) and that Ancient*

*Runes is almost only used by Explorers or historians (Indiana Granger? Now that's a strange idea). The rest of us all took Divination and Care of Magical Creatures; they sounded like the easiest. No need to complicate our lives.*

*I overheard some older Slytherins say that the Divination teacher is a hoax, so I might even get a laugh or two out of it. Blaise is actually looking forward to it. Hopefully, whoever it is won't pull a Lockhart on her...*

*Speaking – well, kinda – about Lockhart, there was a good one yesterday in the Daily Prophet... I'll quote the article here, it's just too good:*

## **GILDEROY LOCKHART: FAMOUS FIGHTER OR FRAUDULENT FICTIONIST?**

Interview by: Rita Skeeter

Most of us, when they hear the name of Gilderoy Lockhart, think of the adventurous man, that courageous fellow who finances his dangerous expeditions by publishing stories of his experiences fighting the dark side and dark creatures; from Vampires to Banshees. At the beginning of this interview, this reporter had the same opinion; Gilderoy Lockhart surely was a great man, worthy of teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts to our children at Hogwarts.

However, as the story, told by Mister Jean Deschamps unfolded, she started to doubt it.

Who is Mister Deschamps [Deh-shans]? A French reporter of respectable blood and reputation and a fan of Gilderoy Lockhart who decided to follow in his footsteps and get the afterword of those he has rescued. He is currently writing an article for the

“Aube d’azure”, the French daily, and has offered me the exclusivity of his interview in England. Quite understandably, I agreed. And here is the resume of his discovery...

Deschamps: [...]I set off from Lyon and headed for Bulgaria, where Lockhart said he had defeated the Vama Vampire. The wizarding section of the town was a small and quaint; I had expected the story to be the great story of the town, so I stayed as close to the main magical pub as I could, looking for a lead. Lockhart never revealed the name of his guide, nor what happened to Natasha.

Skeeter: And I’m sure you were quite looking forward to meeting her.

Deschamps, with a grin: *Certainement, madame.*

However, I was disappointed to learn that the story had apparently slipped out of everyone’s mind. I don’t blame them, though; it seemed most of the attention was turned to their national team’s dilemma\*, but there was nothing about Lockhart, anywhere. So, deciding that waiting was useless, I went and asked people.

(\*As we all know, Koivu, the previous Bulgarian seeker, received a Bludger in the back during the last national match, and is now unfit to play for the next six years, while his spine heals at Str. Krankenhaus der Kobras für magische Verletzungen, the central magical hospital of Bulgaria. [Full story at page S5, “International seeker at seventeen? Bulgarians desperate, or genius on broom?”])

...nothing. There apparently had not been a Vampire anywhere in town, ever.

I thought that, perhaps, Lockhart had changed the name of the town to protect its citizens from a bad reputation, and that the fact that another town bore that name was just a coincidence. However, that left me without a lead.

Skeeter: So you gave up?

Deschamps: I did, and decided instead to head to the Himalayas, to search for the Tibetan monk temple where Lockhart said he had stayed. There had been enough descriptions of the area for me to locate it in the western parts of Xichuan, in what used to be eastern Tibet and is now a part of Muggle China that is heavily defended against Chinese wizards by their Indian counterparts. This time, my search was successful.

Skeeter: Really? And what did the monks say?

Deschamps: You misunderstand, *madame*. I did *find* the monks and hear that there used to be a Yeti terrorizing the region, but there was no word of *monsieur* Lockhart anywhere. They told me that none of them remembered how it had happened, but the yeti was killed, one day.

*Naturellement*, I found this strange. Why would they simply forget about everything? I decided to stay around for a few days, to see if anything would happen. The monks were welcoming, though were wary of magic – understandable, considering the magical situation in the region. However, I found something about them after the sixth day.

Skeeter: What was it?

[I must admit that, by then, I was quite interested in the story.]

Deschamps: I had brought along a... how do you call it? Ensorcelling detector...?

Skeeter: Charm detector?

Deschamps: Yes, exactly that, *Merci!*

Skeeter: So one of them was a wizard?

Deschamps: Oh, *non*. They were all Muggles, although they all knew of the magical world, if only through rumors and stories. However, they all bore signs of being under a spell. After some prodding, one of the Monks agreed to let me check it, and to my great surprise, I found it was a memory charm.

Skeeter: Isn't that the usual method for dealing with Muggles who see magic? They could—

Deschamps: That is the usual method *here*. In that area, however, they tend to prefer more... brutal methods, or simply not acting. Wizards tend to live as far from Muggles as they can and rarely ever go near them. Revealing yourself as a wizard in front of people around there is inviting trouble anyway. Someone had cast a memory charm on not just that monk, but on all of them. After some explaining – and an embarrassing misunderstanding – He agreed to allow me to remove the charm.

Skeeter: Isn't that extremely dangerous?

Deschamps: Yes, unless you know what you are doing. Charms were my specialty at Beaubatons. I was successful, and I learned exactly what had happened;

Lockhart had walked in the temple, asking for the story of who had killed the Yeti – turned out to be one of the head monks – listened to him while taking some notes, then Obliviated him and the monks who had seen Lockhart.

Skeeter: No!

Deschamps: It doesn't stop there. I continued looking around to find the other places he claimed having done heroics, and the story was the same everywhere. Lockhart came in, attracted by the rumors and stories, then cast a memory charm on everyone who had seen him and went off to write.

Gilderoy Lockhart stole the stories of other people and pretended they were his, after wiping clean the original hero's memory – quite illegally in most cases, I assure you.

*The rest of it is pretty boring, but the part I just quoted down for posterity is priceless. It explains quite a few things, actually. Xu and Ginny read the article for him – he's still in the infirmary;*

*apparently, neither Flitwick, McGonagall, Pomfrey nor Dumbledore are able to dispel the beliefs (I think it's more a matter of will than anything else) – and told us he actually sobbed after hearing it. His edition house said they had no idea he was doing that and they are suing him. Actually, so do quite a few parents who read the article and feared his influence could have a negative effect on their children.*

*I just know Blaise's mum is among them. I just know it.*

*Well, that's about it. Gotta hurry now, train's leaving tomorrow and I want to be ready.*

*Next time I write in this, I'll be in third year – that is, assuming I survive the summer.*

\*\*\*

Harry Potter shut his diary, satisfied with what he had written. Stretching his back a bit, he gave a look at his dorm mates. Draco had already finished packing and was down in the common room. Crabbe and Goyle, though, were still busy, arguing about a uniform that both claimed was theirs.

Chuckling, he put the diary inside his trunk, along with the piece of newspaper with the article attached. Most of his own stuff was already packed, though his luggage was noticeably lighter than it had been at the start of the year; the Slytherins had generally agreed that some of the books had a better purpose than reading, and that it would be a waste to simply throw them away. The entire collection of Gilderoy Lockhart's books were now located in the common room, beside the fireplace, to be used during those cold winter nights. Harry was fairly sure Draco would be delighted, assuming being turned into a ferret hadn't turned him off of staying at Hogwarts during the holidays.

Looking around, he tried to find anything that was his – and that wouldn't object being stuffed in his trunk (Read: Except Nemesis and Hedwig). His invisibility cloak was carefully hidden from prying eyes at the bottom, carefully folded among his uniforms. All but one of said robes were there, along with his hat. His – useful – books had been packed the day before.

...except for one.

Carefully, making sure neither of the bigger boys saw him, Harry sneaked his hand under his pillow and pulled out the grey-paged book, the Lexicon, his teacher in dark magic, to whom he hadn't written anything in the last three weeks.

Whom? Book, Harry. Book. Not person. Book.

That made him remember; he *did* have something to ask it, didn't he? Perhaps the way he had acted, back in the chamber of secrets, had something to do with dark magic, and the lexicon might know something about it. And perhaps even the reason why he was still alive after taking the Basilisk's gaze directly.

Knowing the book's illusion powers would make it appear as something else, Harry opened the covers and switched to page 2, taking his quill with his other hand.

*Hello, he wrote.*

**Welcome back, Harry Potter,** it wrote back. **You have not opened my pages in some time.**

*I'm sorry, I've been busy.*

**Apology accepted. Are there any reasons why you chose to open my pages?**

Musing on how to write the next lines, Harry decided to jump head first into it. The Lexicon, as far as he knew, did not believe in beating around the bush.

In a few lines, he wrote what had bothered him: the odd impulses he had felt, including the one during the Quidditch match,

which he now felt was related. When he was finished, the book stayed “silent” for a few seconds, before replying:

**Interesting.**

Nearly spluttering in indignation at the inadequate reply, Harry wrote without thinking:

*That's all you have to say?*

**Oh, no, it wrote back. I merely find it – and you – an interesting case; you truly are unique, Harry Potter.**

Shoving what he considered as useless banter aside, Harry scribbled, <

*What do you think is happening to me?*

**You claimed to have felt scar pains in the presence of Lord Voldemort, did you not? Not waiting for an answer, it continued, I believe you and he are connected, somehow. Using the magic he is so familiar with is, no doubt, opening a deeper channel between the two of you, allowing some of his... playful nature to seep through into you.**

Harry almost shut the book right there. What did that mean? Was he turning into—

**Have no fear, though. As long as you resist those impulses and stay in control of yourself, that should be as far as the connection will go. I highly doubt the Killing curse, even a foiled one, can cause one's soul to leech into another, or even allow a passable bridge between you two. You will not become another Voldemort unless you wish to do so.**

Relieved, Harry nodded, knowing it saw him. He knew he would never want to, so he was all right.

**This connection could also be the reason why you are a Parselmouth.** Harry's opened wide in surprise after reading these words. That little tidbit *had* been bothering him all year long. **It is possible that, while his soul cannot leech into yours, his**

**powers did. The Killing curse is a very potent spell, and a lot of power is sent into it by the caster.**

*Is this why I could stand the Basilisk's stare?*

**...possibly, although you failed to inform me of that.**

Harry blinked. He had never really needed to inform the book of anything going on in the castle. Hadn't it seen the battle? Had it been 'looking' somewhere else? He felt a pang of indignation at the thought that while he was risking his life, his mentor had been safely staring at the fishes in the lake.

"Still writing in that thing?" Draco's voice cut into his musings as the boy entered the dorm room. Startled, Harry shut the book with a loud noise. He noticed that, apparently, Crabbe and Goyle had ended their quarrel and were now gone. Had he been *that* interested in the Lexicon's words?

...the lexicon. He had just slammed it shut. Was it going to be mad at him?

'*IT'S A BOOK!!*' He forced himself to remember. 'It doesn't have feelings!'

'Riddle did.' Another part of his mind retorted.

'Riddle was someone in a book.' He retorted.

'Who says the Lexicon isn't?' And Harry didn't quite have a witty retort to that little answer.

"O~oi, Captain to Seeker, come in, Potter!" Draco interrupted his mental arguing – never a good sign, that – with a teasing drawl. "Back from your trip, I see."

"Bugger off." Harry retorted while putting the Lexicon down on his bedsheet. "Did Blaise send you to tell me to hurry?"

"You know she'd just barge her way in, boy's dorm or not." Draco replied negatively.

"Who, then?"

"Weaslette did, actually." The boy clarified. "Besides, I wanted to talk a bit."

Puzzled, Harry asked, "about what?"

"I wanted to talk about the diary."

Harry gave him a glare. "I'm not letting you read it."

"The other one, I mean. Riddle's."

The black-haired boy blinked in confusion. What did he mean? It was gone, wasn't it?

Seeing as Harry didn't understand, Draco continued, frowning: "I know I gave it back to you after our dorm was turned upside down. So how come Ginny had it?"

'He didn't give it back...' Harry, still confused, denied mentally, wondering exactly what—

Oh. Right. He had given the Lexicon back and thought it was the Diary of Tom Riddle. But Ginny had just stolen it, back then, so...

Oh...

...oh hell.

How in the world was he supposed to explain that?! 'Oh, you didn't really give me the diary; it was actually a talking book on dark magic that's been teaching me for a while.' Yeah, that would work.

Do pigs fly today?

...Hm... nope. Better not risk it then.

Harry dug into his mind, trying to find a reasonable explanation. Ginny had stolen it away later? No, he had barely seen her afterwards, except for when he had confronted her about it. Even in the hallways, she had been noticeably absent. One of Ginny's friends, then?

...a bit more likely, but how would they have known?

"I see you're not coming up with an explanation." Draco finally growled. "I want to know what's going on, Potter."

*He knows*

That's it. Screw an explanation and find something else to distract him... er... the weather would probably not work, and he couldn't find a way to orient the conversation toward Quidditch.

*Blackmail*

"Actually, I have a question for you," He found himself saying before he could think it over. "Riddle said he had a servant helping him outside of Hogwarts."

"And?" Draco prompted, frowning.

"A servant who chased Dumbledore away, which is what Fudge and your father did." Harry continued, thinking about it as he spoke. "You won't let me go to your house and you don't want your dad to know I'm your friend."

"What are you saying?" Draco challenged him to finish his theory, his feelings hidden behind an emotionless mask.

"Is your father a servant of You-know-who?"

Harry didn't really need the answer; he had put the pieces of the ugly puzzle together as he had been speaking them. It was the most likely explanation. But then, why wasn't he in prison? Why did Fudge trust him?

Was this the reason why Mrs. Zabini had helped them learn how to duel?

Or perhaps Fudge was one, and Mr. Malfoy simply didn't like him...

No. Fudge had protested against putting Dumbledore away.

In front of him, Draco eyes were now glaring daggers at him and his face was paler than usual, but most of the rest of his surprise was hidden behind a cold, emotionless mask. Harry knew he was angry. No, make that furious. For a few seconds that seemed like minutes, neither of them spoke. One was waiting for an answer while the other was mulling it over, thinking of the best response.

"So that's your game, eh, Potter." The platinum-haired boy finally replied flatly. "Fine, here's the deal; you keep your secrets, I'll keep mine."

Harry nodded in agreement. His gamble had allowed him to escape revealing the Lexicon, but...

As he saw Draco angrily turn away and walk out, he couldn't help but feel a pang of remorse. He had resorted to blackmail against a friend. Had it truly been a good idea? Would Draco have kept the lexicon a secret?

...well, what is done is done, he reflected as he opened his trunk to put away the grey-paged book.

Few minutes later, the dorm was empty. Hidden underneath Harry Potter's invisibility cloak, the Lexicon was silent, which was normal for a book. Had it been able to make sounds, however, one would have clearly heard a sinister chuckle and wondered where it came from.

**So you can notice it, Harry Potter? You truly are... unique...**

\*\*\*

The Slytherin common room was, once again lively. People were talking loudly and walking about, smiling and giving the room a cheerful atmosphere. Summer vacations were about to start,

after all. Some of the older Slytherins had even planned a party, but a fourth year Gryffindor had caught them sneaking food out of the kitchen and had warned McGonagall, who had been quick to put a stop to it. The faces of those who had been caught were the only ones who were even a bit sulky.

Everything was packed away and everyone was ready to leave on that morning, the last time the students would wake up at Hogwarts before going back home. Well, that is, almost everyone.

“Ginny, Xu found tranfigormation note-taking book!” The Chinese girl called out to the red-head who was running all over the Slytherin common room, trying to find everything that was hers.

“She let everyone borrow her things,” Emma replied flatly to Blaise after she had asked. “Now she’s looking for them.”

Harry remembered the general attitude of the burrow, where pretty much everything in the house was a hand me down, and where borrowing and handing things to everyone was the rule more than the exception.

‘Old habits die hard...’ He mused, inwardly chuckling, while Ginny’s voice called out for a pot of blue ink. Hopefully she would learn her lesson by next year...

\*\*\*

The tall gray walls and sky-tearing towers of Hogwarts seemed to glow of a light of their own, standing proudly over the sheer cliff of sharp stones. The black lake shimmered with the brightness of the sun reflecting on its surface. The forbidden forest seemed almost passive, leaves and branches slowly swaying in the soft, cool breeze.

And suddenly a hill came in the way and Harry did not see his second home anymore.

The Hogwarts express was speeding on its rails, carrying a few hundred teenage witches and wizards to London and to their families. Harry, Hermione, Blaise and Ron had managed to find an empty compartment early in the boarding. Their things had long

since been hauled and secured in the overhanging nets. Draco had went off with Crabbe and Goyle without saying goodbye.

The other boy had not spoken to him since the previous afternoon, but he didn't know if it was because of his actions of the previous day or if it was simply because he was getting into the role of "He-who-hates-the-boy-who-lived" that he wanted his father to believe.

He hoped it was the latter.

Taking his eyes away from the window, he looked at what his friends were doing. They had all taken off the uniforms and dressed in Muggle clothes as so they would not look suspicious in King's Cross station in the evening.

Hermione, sitting in front of him, was clad in a pair of blue jeans with a pink T-shirt and was reading *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* for what was probably the millionth time.

Blaise, beside him and wearing a black shirt and shorts, had one hand in a bag of Every Flavor Beans and the other hovering above a nervous-looking white knight, who had every movement option blocked by either a white bishop, a rook or the queen.

As for Ron, who was sitting beside his housemate, what he was wearing could possibly pass for normal Muggle clothing, to a blind and retarded person, perhaps, and even then it had to be in total obscurity and at a distance. Harry had heard him complain to Hermione that a bright orange wool T-shirt with the Chudley Cannons logo and a green pair of sickly green pants were perfectly reasonable, and that no, it did not make him look like a Christmas tree, which, he defended arduously, were green and brown. She had given up after the fourth try.

"Queen to E-5, checkmate." He said as said piece moved, shattering the knight in the middle of a berating tirade toward Blaise, who looked both cross and relieved at having the offending piece destroyed.

"Five moves..." She whined, her face landing in her left hand. "You could have gone easy on me, you know."

Ron shook his head, smirking. "I don't think so."

"You normally wouldn't try your luck, Blaise." Hermione noted, looking up from what looked like the page on Hippogriffs.

"I'm in a good mood," The girl replied with a grin, pushing herself deeper in the plushy seat. "No school until September: no homework, no more Snape, no studies, no teachers, no more Snape, no worries, lots of fun... did I mention no more Snape?"

"Yes," Harry replied.

"You should be more respectful, Blaise." Hermione chided. "I mean, I know Professor Snape isn't the most... er..."

"Clean?" Ron suggested.

"Fair?" Blaise offered.

"*Agreeable* person in the world," Hermione said forcefully, though she did not deny what her friends had said, "but you shouldn't really... er..."

"Forget it, 'mione." Blaise cut in, grinning. "No school, means not even *thinking* about the daft git, or any schoolwork."

"And we have summer homework." Hermione tried to put in, but the red-head ignored her.

"No school means no work. No work means a very happy Blaise. A very happy Blaise means..."

"A headache for everyone?" Ron offered teasingly.

"...means I'm not going to steal Hermione's book and bludgeon you with it for that one." The girl finished with a glare at the other red-head, who snickered.

An instant later, the door opened and Ginny and Emma looked in. Seeing who was there, both younger girls smiled hopefully.

"Did any of you see Xu?" The red-head girl asked. "We can't find her."

The soon-to-be third years looked at each other and, on a common accord, shook their heads.

"Not since yesterday," Harry replied. "Maybe she's in the back?"

"I guess she has to be." Emma sighed. "Come on, Ginny. Let's find her."

When they came back, about fifteen minutes later, however, they still hadn't found her. Harry just supposed she had found a compartment somewhere else, where the girls had forgot to look.

Ginny and Emma stayed with them until the train arrived at Kings cross station. After picking up their things, the six children left the train and tried to find their parents. Ron and Ginny easily found theirs, but only after Fred, George and Percy had done the same. The concentration of red-heads was a dead give-away. Hermione hugged them goodbye and left to the Muggle side of the station.

"Emmanuelle!" A shrill voice called out as an purple-clad aristocratic elderly woman made her way toward them, swinging a red purse in one hand and holding her violet witch hat on her head with the other, followed by two children who bore a barely noticeable resemblance to Harry and Ron. "There you are!"

"It's *Emma*, mom!!" The girl whined, though she accepted the bone-crushing hug from her surprisingly strong foster mother. Two minutes later, only Blaise and Harry were left of their group.

After the Zabinis had found them – Mr. Zabini looked in awe at the Hogwarts Express, as if a bit disbelieving that the train actually led his daughter and her friend to a magic school, no matter how many daily proofs of the existence of magic he had from his wife – the two children were led to the family's red Honda Accord.

Harry smiled, even though he was squeezed into the car and found Hedwig and Nemesis unhappily sharing his lap, as the streets of London lazily passed by at the pace of the car. Another year had ended at Hogwarts, and he knew that, come September, another would start. Fervently, he hoped that next year would be calmer, and that at least this time, he would not meet Voldemort again, in any of his shapes.

But for now, there was a summer to enjoy. And with the Zabinis, he was absolutely certain that he would have no choice at it.

## **End of book 2: The chamber of secrets**

### **Author's notes:**

**SPECIAL THANKS TO SYKOSHIPPO FOR THE HOSPITAL NAME ^\_-**

(Yeah, call me nitpicky, I absolutely wanted to put the hospital's name there, even though I could easily have written the scene without it... ^\_-)

(I had wanted to put up your account address, but FF.net decided to be a bitch and cut a LOT more than just the address. Sorry 'bout that, Sykoshippo.)

I'VE FINALLY FINISHED IT!!

Gods... I hope I never see another letter in the rest of my life... \*reads over\* ACK!!! \*dies\*

Just kidding.

After all, since you're reading this, that means I've started to write book 3 ^\_-

Hermione's pink T-shirt? Blame my friend Kim, who showed me pictures of Harry Potter 3. The idea stuck to my head.

About what the Lexicon said... well, as that last line of its says, it was frugal about the truth. I put up the Snape and Dumbledore talk in last chapter because I knew it would just be too confusing if I twist and hide yet ANOTHER truth... ^\_-

I despise the finale. Way too rough, but hell... I can't seem to get it to work otherwise. Oh well, the start of book 3 is VERY nice, to compensate ^\_-

**This is a warning I put up in my group before already, but here goes:**

I cannot make a mistake in book 3. While book 1 introduces the present of the wizarding world and book 2 the far past, book 3 adds in the mix the main area where I've added changes. Breaking canon or my fanon at this point will be extremely confusing. It's also my favorite book of the lot.

One thing is for sure, though; I will NOT make it as long as this one.

If I do that, shoot me.

Repeatedly, so I don't rise as a ghoul and kill you all later.

Or even worse, write in my death. ^\_-

I swear. If I start and I'm dead, I'm never going to stop. At least 'till my hands fall off, that is.

...oi, why are all of you carrying guns with only \*one\* bullet?

Why are you lot all fighting to know which one will shoot me?  
X\_x

## **ANSWERS TO THE BOOKS CLOSING IN FRONT OF THE REVIEWERS:**

Anon E mouse Jr: Tell ya now, you'll love it.

Lunawolf: It was my pleasure, actually. Killing teletubbies is good for everyone's health.

**RaistlinofMetallica:** Pretty Sammy, Teletubbies and Doom in a dream done by someone in the Harry Potter universe. Damn I'm good ^\_-. I didn't like that, actually... \*shrug\*

Ranchan17: Yes, I actually cracked up when you asked me how was progress for the next chapter and I was reading the Betaed version. \*snigger\*

Mirie: It could have, but it would have been one HECK of a LONG chapter. There's a very good reason for the Elmira-Snape relationship (\*COUGH\*Not romance, no f\*gin way!!), but it's a secret. 'till somewhere in early book 3, that is. Ron and Draco arguing scenes are fun to write ^\_-

**Flumox:** hehehe... that, is a secret. \*snicker\* Oh, I HAVE to draw that one... little Tom Riddle's diary with an indigestion, praying to the porcelain throne... lol! ^\_^ Yes, tenchi. I just couldn't pass it up; blame it on the Mihoshi special I watched that week. O\_o Elmira "Mousse" Zabini... the mistress of Hidden weapons... \*shudders\*

*The Vampire Story Hunter:* \*blink\* O~kay! Here we go, explanations:

First, on Voldemort's quote: I can easily imagine Voldemort saying that to get himself more followers and give a kick to their morals and fluffy bunnies. He's already lied in the past: Think of the werewolf cubs under Hagrid's bed. And Salazar Slytherin's

quote? Where is that from? I don't remember reading any lines told from Slytherin himself, not even in book 5. Besides, the magic itself is not evil. The magic makes one more tuned to their dark side, but you can use it with good intentions. But remember what they say about the road to hell... ^\_-

And in case you haven't noticed, I've made you a fave reviewer, simply 'cuz you tried to point out a mistake-that-wasn't-one and launched me in a debate. Thanks! ^.^

*Natara:* I said that Riddle *studied* from the book... draw your own conclusions, I'm not telling ^\_- . Glad you liked the Lockhart thing, so did I. (in fact, I'm thinking of drawing a picture of Mrs. Zabini torturing Lockhart a bit... or at least what Harry pictured ^\_- )

*Risty:* Too true. It's easy to bend someone into a pretzel shape... just remember to tie the legs up behind the head correctly with the ears and to dislocate both arms to pull them around to make the X part... ^\_-

*Devonny Rose:* That... is a secret. Most of it, actually. Mrs. Zabini IS Blaise's mother, yes. However... well, as I mentioned, secrets.

*Blackheart Syaoran:* Ah, the good old days when I sent my friend from hell to hell with a rocket launcher... then Quake arrived and I did it in style... ^\_- As for Dumbledore letting it slide, the worst is already made, so the only thing they *could* do is watch over him and make sure he doesn't go Medieval on everyone. Yes, that WAS pretty Sammy and a Teletubby... hence why I killed it. No, a Fudge/Malfoy VS Dumblidore/Elmira/Hagrid scene would simply have revealed too much. It happened, in the background. Maybe I'll put it up in a side story, after I've really released the information. (For that, Harry needs to be the one hearing it)

*Sykoshippo:* It's for a good reason... Teletubbies are evil, evil things. Well, I know it works on my older sister :P. Did I say expensive? \*checks\* Nope, I said she didn't wear the cheap ones. Just picture her in regular everyday clothes. Yes, the creator is never satisfied... guess that's because I aim a bit too high (just

Barb LP's level...) ^\_-. Aim for the moon, they say... \*shrug\* well, good. You'll like it, I'm sure ^\_-.

*Dragonsprincess*: Yes, it was surprising! You're about the only one, there are two or three who came close, though. What happened between Snape and Elmira? Well... that's... not something I'll say right now. Bet I surprised you there, right? <.<> --right?

*Jedi Buttercup*: \*shrug\* Clichés can be good... but originality is better. Besides, the changes I do are necessary; I'm not the one in control here ^\_-. Well, almost. (\*goes back to planning\*) And as for Harry being evil and dark-ish... well, rest assured, it'll end all right for our favorite Potter. He's (\*gets mouth blocked\*)

Hamish: Eek! \*Scampers off\*

Bookworm04: You'll love it, then ^\_-. It's my fave too... used to be this one, but I'm kinda fed up with it by now... :P

*Ides of March*: Well, it just so happens that I'm NOT Chinese, and that's as good as I found... T\_T. But I'll remember you, if I ever need Xu to speak Chinese again (And I probably will ^\_-)

Trugeta: Well, I know now. Cut me some slack, I'm French/English/Wannabe Japanese. German and Chinese (read above) aren't languages I know T\_T. And I'm glad you liked it, by the way.

RickW22: 'course I am. I'm not stopping now ^\_-

Jeangab057: She is cool, isn't she? ^\_-

*Simply Myself*: I cracked up when I wrote that; actually said "Oh, you are so clueless, Harry Potter," even though I'M the one who made him think that (kinda) and---babbling. Er... Tom Riddle is kinda dead. If you mean Voldielocks... well, that's a secret. Glad you liked it once again ^\_-

*Serpent of Light*: This is the last chapter... of book 2, I mean. \*dances saying "Can't believe I wrote that!! ^\_^"\*(Yes, the little ^\_^

was said, don't ask how) The Zabinis rock, eh? Prepare for a great dose of them early book 3, then ^\_-